



Developing skills via work placements in accounting: Student and employer views

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ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates the development of skills during a work placement year within a Scottish accounting degree. It discusses the history of placements within higher education, the advantages and disadvantages of placements from student and employer perspectives, and work placement as a vehicle for developing personal transferable skills. Students and employers involved in work placements agreed that they were effective in developing a range of skills. Their views were then compared with those of students at a similar university without a placement degree. Degrees including a work placement were found to be a useful complement to more traditionally structured degrees.

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1. Introduction

Almost two decades ago, the Accounting Education Change Commission (AECC, 1990) developed a list of fifty-five capabilities that it believed were required by accounting graduates. The list encompassed both knowledge and skills, as well as wider curricular aspects, in the belief that a university education in accounting would be deficient if it only concentrated on knowledge acquisition and technical skills. As a result, the standard of personal transferable skills possessed by accounting students has been the subject of a considerable amount of research attention since the 1990s. Among the most frequently cited skills identified as requiring attention have been communication, both verbal and written, computing/information technology skills, critical thinking, problem-solving skills and the ability to extract and analyse information from a variety of sources (see Appendix A). Other skills which have been discussed less frequently but which are nonetheless regarded as important in the literature include listening, the ability to interpret financial information, working in a group, creative thinking, coping with stress, meeting deadlines, the ability to generate practical ideas and time management (see Appendix A).

Appendix A shows that skills identified as being insufficiently developed in the 1990s persist in being perceived to be insufficiently developed. This is despite the increasing focus on personal transferable skills by universities (see, for example, Albrecht & Sack, 2000; Howieson, 2003). Hassall, Joyce, Arquero Montaño, and Donoso Anes (2005a) argued that a wider set of skills and knowledge topics should be embedded into the curriculum to develop the skills needed by employers. Similarly, Burns, Hopper, and Yazdifar (2004) argued that the changing role of the management accountant requires both new curricula and the development of new skills. They felt that current accounting education is overly technical and procedural, and does not equip future accountants adequately for later working life. They concluded that:

Future management accountants must be able to work alongside, and support, their managerial colleagues; show good inter-personal skills; be creative and holistic in integrating strategic, financial and operating dimensions, communicate

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effectively in oral arenas; and be proactive. These skills are not new but they are becoming increasingly important. Yet, they are still often not emphasised in education, training and assessment (Burns et al., 2004, p. 20).

The above views assume that graduates of the future will require a wider range of skills than may have been expected of them in the past (Peters, 2000). Peters (2000) questions whether universities are in a position to foster these skills and university/industry linkages have for a long time been viewed as a means of transferring knowledge and skills as part of a two-way process (Segal Quince Wicksteed, 1988).

This paper examines a curriculum development that integrates accounting education and the business world, provides an alternative environment for the development of an expanded range of personal transferable skills and offers an innovative curricular structure as an alternative to traditionally structured, university-based accounting degrees. The paper's aim is to evaluate the development of personal transferable skills via a work placement year within an accounting degree at a Scottish university, with an emphasis on the views of students and employers. While focusing on a degree in a UK context, the paper also discusses work placements generally as the underlying issues have wider relevance. Since the insights gained from any one university will have limited validity, it was decided to compare the views of students at the university offering a work placement with the views of students at another, similar, university where work placements are not available. These comparisons therefore provide additional insight into the perceived value of a work placement.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The history of placement provision within higher education is discussed, followed by an assessment of the benefits of placements from both student and employer perspectives, and also potential disadvantages. The context of the study and the research method adopted to assess work placement as a vehicle for the development of personal transferable skills are then explained before presenting and discussing the results of a study of the views of students and employers who have participated in work placement. These results are then compared with the views of students who do not have the opportunity to undertake a placement. Finally, conclusions and recommendations for future research are offered.

2. Placement provision within higher education

The incorporation of work placement into degree programmes links the worlds of academe and work, and the academic and vocational domains. While the vocational domain is often regarded as being at the bottom of a hierarchy of knowledge and inferior to abstract, generalised, declarative knowledge (Stevenson, 2003), a number of benefits of work placement have been advanced. Stevenson (2005) argues that the meanings that people derive from work can produce new ways of knowing. By placing learning in a different context, interconnections are facilitated (Hager, 2004) and social, economic and cultural influences allow students the opportunity to critique what they have learned in different ways (Lawy, Bloomer, & Biesta, 2004).

The interconnections between the worlds of academe and work have evolved as higher education has expanded throughout the twentieth century (Teichler & Kehm, 1995). Successive reports in the UK have stressed the need for highly qualified manpower (HMSO, 1987), familiarisation with the world of work through work experience (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997) and the development of employability skills, such as communication, numeracy, technology and learning how to learn (CIHE, 1998; CVCP, 1998). Initiatives such as the Enterprise in Higher Education Initiative, the introduction of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) [and their Scottish equivalent Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs)] and the competence movement have also, arguably, contributed to dramatic changes in the higher education environment (Saunders, 1995). The trend towards work-based learning, whether involving work-based NVQs, short courses or work placement, is significant. A common feature is the importance of 'practice', which Saunders (1995, p. 209) defines as 'a way of doing something, the pattern of which is reproduced in a social context (i.e. work)'.

These trends show that higher education and the world of work, though very different, are increasingly being encouraged to develop links. French (1993) argues that such links enhance students' learning. In his view, "educational institutions" teach *about* life, but "essential learning" – i.e. "real life" itself, actual experience – only happens "outside", "in the field" (p. 409) (italics in original). Work placement encapsulates this view. The Crick Report (NACEIC, 1964) recommended that a period of work placement should be introduced into degrees in Business Studies in the United Kingdom. This so-called 'sandwich degree' model was intended to allow students to combine academic study with practical experience and to provide the opportunity for each type of learning to inform the other. Work placements became commonplace so that, by 1990, approximately one-third of all students in the UK's polytechnics (most of which became universities in 1992¹) undertook an industrial or professional placement (Barnett, 1990).

Despite the prevalence of work placement, little research has been undertaken in this area. Cameron-Jones and O'Hara (1990) reviewed the placement experience of nursing, teaching, pharmacy and engineering students and reported a high degree of student satisfaction with the placement experience. Auburn, Ley, and Arnold (1993) discussed the placement experience of psychology students and found that the placement provided unique experiences not evident for non-placement students, relating to their co-operative and communicative abilities. Arnold, Loan-Clarke, Harrington, and Hart (1999) also found that work placement could foster some skills more effectively than academic study, namely social skills and the ability

¹ These universities are often referred to as 'new' universities in the UK.

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