

Widening Participation, Employability and Work-Related Learning – What Works

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Social mobility has been a significant strand through UK public policy in the recent years, and this paper considers the potential role of work-related learning in enabling such mobility for current and future HE students. To do this, I explore some of the terminology most prevalent in this area of Higher Education policy and practice, such as ‘employability’ and ‘widening participation’ (WP) and relate them to differing forms of work experience. I explore how they interrelate using an analytical account of a HEFCE funded internships scheme designed specifically to address factors previously lined to social mobility, access to work experience (Cabinet Office, 2009). I conclude by mapping out some of the considerations for work related learning to have a positive impact on social mobility.

‘Employability’

This catch-all term is used in a variety of ways, encompassing the range of factors involved in graduate progression to the job market. When broken down, its meanings can differ wildly, from

- a range of generic skills and abilities developed by students, ideally possessed on graduation to ensure....
- ...actual graduate employment, or
- a longer term view of graduates’ ability to manage a career trajectory over time (CBI, 2009; Watts, 2006).

Some of this confusion can be traced back to the introduction in 1998 of institutional performance measures relating to employment outcomes, billed as an ‘employability performance indicator’. These were based on the ‘first destination’ survey, conducted six months after graduation. As with all quantitative measures, this assumes a straightforward, causal and therefore measurable relationship between educational experience and progression into the job market. As an external objective measure, it bears no relation to the aspirations and experiences of the individual learner. Even if this relationship were measurable, the indicator has been proven to be unreliable in terms of long term career trajectories, as longitudinal data shows that since expansion of mass HE, graduate careers take 3-5 years to establish. (Purcell *et al.*, 2005). Despite this, it remains an important policy driver, with the data being used as evidence of ‘employability’ in the new ‘key information sets’ which all English Universities will soon be required to produce.

The ESECT (Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team) within the Higher Education Academy, produced a series of publications in the ‘Learning and Employability’ series stimulating debate within higher education, and linking employability with concurrent developments around career development learning, work related learning and personal development planning. As part of this, Yorke (2006) identifies three constructs of employability:

- employability as employment outcome;
- employability as a learning process; and
- employability as a set of learning outcomes.

And notes the alternative perspectives of

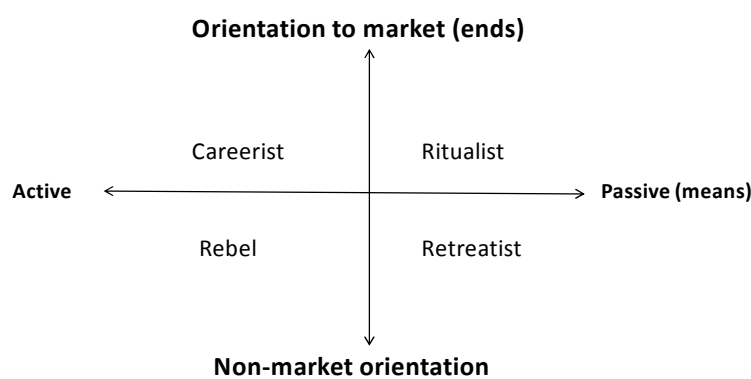
- Employability as the possession of the necessary characteristics (i.e. the **potential**) to obtain and retain *desired* employment (employability = the individual)
- **Realised** Employability (having obtained desired employment, which attests to the individual possession of required attributes) (employability = the context)

This is a helpful distinction for those within higher education, yet the discourse remains supply-side, not fully acknowledging that the possession of the potential to obtain and be effective in desired employment, does not automatically and simplistically translate to employment: structures of the labour market, macroeconomic factors and structural disadvantage will all have an impact here. By ignoring that, Wilton (2011) notes that with “an explicit policy focus on the supply-side of the labour market, [it] is more likely to be associated with placing responsibility for a lack of

employability on the individual” (p 4). An alternative perspective is to see employability as also a reflection of employer behaviour and the labour market (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006).

The work of Tomlinson (2007) and others also brings in the important subjective dimension, demonstrating that within this pervading discourse, students and graduates are forming their own view of the labour market and developing attitudes and identities accordingly. This contradicts the dominant view in policy of students as rational investors who behave in consistent and predictable ways. In Tomlinson’s study, students were engaged in the difficult process of constructing individualised narratives of employability. They had bought the rhetoric of the individual, and saw their careers unfolding in response to high levels of personal agency. If any barriers were foreseen then harder work and determination would provide the additional agency to overcome them. The ‘economy of experience’ (including their work experience) was an essential part of these individualised narratives. Tomlinson develops a typology which differentiates between careerists, ritualists, retreatists and rebels, dependent on orientation to the market and to action.

Fig 1: Ideal-type model of student orientations



Tomlinson, M (2007) ‘Graduate Employability and Student attitudes and orientations to the labour market’, *Journal of Education and Work* Vol 20 No 4 pp 285-304

As we start to explore individual's experiences of employability, it is worth introducing theories of career development, to shed some light on how those orientations are formed and can develop.

Much of the employability discourse critiqued above is underpinned by what Hodkinson calls 'folk career theory', which includes assumptions about career decisions being cognitive and rational and career progression being normally straightforward if a 'good' career decision has been made (Hodkinson, 2008). In fact, Hodkinson argues, decisions are not rational and progression is strongly influenced by external factors.

Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) work on ‘careership’ highlights the structural and agentic elements that create an individual’s ‘horizons for action’, drawing on ideas from Bourdieu about 'habitus' (internal dispositions determined by contextual factors) and 'field' (referring to the structures of social relations and power dynamics in different settings) (Grenfell, 2004).

Learning theories of career (e.g. Mitchell and Krumboltz, 1996) highlight inimportance of direct and vicarious learning experiences lead individuals to make generalisations from their observations of self and the world. Drawing on Bandura's social learning theory (1977), we can see how these observations affect a person’s self-efficacy beliefs, which will determine their decision to pursue a particular goal, and ‘task approach skills’ (which includes how they sort and sift career information, set goals and make decisions).

Looking at employability through this lens, the factors which influence either immediate employment or long term career trajectory are dependent on individual aspirations, chosen sectors and work roles, and goals which each person sees as appropriate and achievable aspirations for themselves.

Work experience, a broad term which can refer to everything from assessed placements as part of a vocational course to informal and individually negotiated short periods of unpaid work experience, is often welcomed as an important contributing factor to students' **employability** (Jensen, 2010; Vasager, 2011). 'Work experience' has been shown to have a direct impact upon first destination data (Little et al, 2006), and has developed an increasing profile within the popular discourse, with quantitative data on levels of placement learning also due to appear in the new KIS profiles.

In practice there are many different models for supporting students in gaining work experience in different contexts. These tend to lie between two extremes: a 'supported self-sourcing' approach to work experience (where students are supported through information and guidance to identify possible providers of work experience and make their own approaches) and a 'placing' or brokerage model (where opportunities are negotiated between the institution and the employer and a student placed or a shortlist of suitable students passed on to the employer). Further analysis is laid out in table 1.

Table 1: Contrasting models of supporting work experience

| Model | Supported Self-sourcing | Brokerage |
|---------------|---|---|
| Advantages | <p>Student leads the process, as autonomous, independent learner</p> <p>Student develops abilities to negotiate the labour market themselves, which can be applied in the future</p> <p>Consistent with support models for graduate transitions</p> | <p>Can be easily targeted at specific sectors or groups of students</p> <p>Easier for both employers and students</p> <p>Direct engagement with employers can influence their practices</p> |
| Disadvantages | <p>Confident and engaged students are more likely to access the support</p> <p>Any employer discrimination is unseen and therefore cannot be challenged</p> | <p>Burden of time passes to the institution – costly to run. Unsustainable level of support to offer</p> |

In reality, a fully brokered model is rare and the nature of the work experience requires different approaches to self-sourcing. For academic schools with a strong placement culture and significant levels of participation in placements, it is usual to find strong support for self-sourcing. For non accredited work experience such as that gained through job shops and careers services, there is usually less support available in terms of student: support ratios.

A further variable beyond sourcing and placing, is the resource given to the ongoing process of managing the learning and supporting reflection on experience. Work experience becomes better described as work-related learning in contexts where students are given ongoing pedagogically informed support, with an explicit focus on the underpinning reflective process, to harness their learning and incorporate that into longer term career plans.

'Widening participation' is an umbrella term for an imperative to broaden the range of students who have access to higher education, particularly in terms of age, ethnic background, disability and social class.

Both the economic prosperity and social justice arguments for increasing participation in higher education of those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds rest on assumptions about educational attainment and increased economic returns and social mobility. Whilst these are demonstrable at one level (UUK, 2007), it is not a predictable link for all individuals. As the careers and employability literature shows, these background characteristics can impact on 'horizons for action', worldview generalisations and self-efficacy beliefs. These can influence career goals, as well as attitudes to

work related learning. For example, a student may self-select not to pursue a career path for which significant unpaid work experience has become the normal entry route.

The labour market and employers' behaviour has a role to play too. For example, a particular complicating factor flows from the diversity of institutions within the HE sector. Whilst participation in HE overall from the target group has increased, a gap has emerged between the most selective universities and the sector overall (Sutton Trust, 2010). This is significant for the employability of WP students due to the targeting of selective universities by graduate recruiters, with many promoting their brand extensively at a small number of institutions.

Research into WP students' experiences of higher education has typically been at post-1992 institutions (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006, Redmond, 2006, Greenbank and Hepworth, 2008). These authors highlight some of the challenges WP students can experience, with less time to participate in campus-based student activities, a serial approach to work and study and poor networks resulting from their lack of economic and social capital. However, in selective and employer targeted institutions with smaller numbers of students from these backgrounds, there are risks of additional and compounded disadvantage. As a smaller proportion of the student body, WP students are more at risk of exclusion from those aspects of the student experience with the greatest potential to enhance employability. Despite the enhanced social capital associated with their degree, they could be unable to access it. If offered generically, institution wide initiatives to enhance students' employability (e.g. through placement learning, or other initiatives such as the accreditation of extra-curricular activities) can widen the gap.

In addition, the Tomlinson research highlighted earlier into different students' orientations to employability has highlighted the different individual starting points which require differing levels of support and interventions. There has been no explicit focus in this research of the impact of social class, but considering these typologies alongside the WP student research, we can speculate that disadvantage may be compounded if a WP student who also has a retreatist orientation is not supported to move beyond it.

The institutional diversity highlighted above also impacts on the nature and extent of support for work-related learning. In some institutions, particularly post 1992 Universities, part time hourly paid jobs alongside studies and placements as part of a programme of study are more prevalent, with learning often well supported in the latter. In more in traditional institutions, formal summer internship schemes (often offered by large graduate recruiters) or unpaid placements often negotiated by the student are more common. Participation in these is also often more competitive, with a career focus on the occupation or sector concerned often forming part of an employer's criteria.

It is these latter schemes which were highlighted in the Milburn report on fair access to the professions (Cabinet Office, 2009) as the work experience which has the greatest potential to lead to social mobility. The problem highlighted was how these type of experiences are harder for people of some backgrounds to get as they often rely on personal or parental networks, are prohibitive to those without parental financial support as they are often unpaid and tend to be located in London, where living costs are highest.

So, to bring all these strands together:

students employability is potentially affected by their social background

placement learning has a positive impact on employability

access to work experience has a role to play in social mobility.

However, the barriers for some students in accessing the most beneficial forms of work experience creates a spiral effect. Socially advantaged students are able to maximise their employability, increasing the gap between them and WP students. The introduction of higher student fees in England throws these issues into even sharper relief.

As a result of the final report of the Panel on the Fair Access to the Professions highlighting difficulties for some students in doing unpaid work experience, HEFCE invited HE institutions in England to bid to operate paid internships for students from widening participation backgrounds over summer 2010. The University of Warwick (in partnership with the University of Birmingham) successfully bid for 25 funded internships at each institution. I was Head of Careers at Warwick at the time and was involved in the establishment, operation and evaluation of the Warwick part of the programme.

This activity was located in the Centre for Student Careers and Skills (CSCS) at Warwick, which had been created 12 months earlier through the integration of the Careers Centre and skills development provision. This resulting large department was still developing its integrated approach to career and skill development when this project began. Priorities of the new department included maximising 'reach', engaging non-users and demonstrating the qualitative and quantitative impact of activities.

With such a short term programme (May- Sept 2010), the pragmatic priority was to design an effective scheme that could be implemented quickly by existing staff. As a result, we focused on mirroring existing processes for service delivery (based on supported self-sourcing) rather than establishing a new infrastructure.

Our bid specified eligibility criteria of: students with a disability; students in receipt of Warwick scholarship, students over 21 at the start of undergraduate programme, those in the first generation of their family to experience HE, or those from a black or minority ethnic group. Family social background was also included as a criterion and whilst the other criteria are not synonymous with social background, we expected that to dominate the demographic targeted.

Internships were offered flexibly and over varying time periods from 30 – 120 hours, so as to meet the complex needs of the diverse client groups. Bursaries of up to £775 for a 4 week placement were available, either for a self-sourced internship or for placements which CSCS obtained by contacting employers about the programme. We sought to support the students' learning through the placement with preparatory guidance as well as a structured reflection at the end of the placement on learning and impact on their overall career development.

There were difficulties in identifying and targeting the right groups of students, both ethically and practically. From an ethical standpoint, we had previously shied away from targeting our services by diversity criteria, and had limited trials to some activities for black and minority ethnic students and older students. This approach was based on previous student feedback, as well as a fear of problematising students' backgrounds and conveying negative messages about their likely future experiences which could demotivate and lower aspirations. From a practical perspective, the data needed to target groups were not always easily extractable from the student records system. Data on finances and on socio-economic background of students comes along with their initial application from the centralised UCAS process and is not reliably complete due to high levels of non-disclosure. This is a key issue for universities considering running targeted programmes and highlights the need for effective management of WP data for current students.

As a result, we decided to promote the scheme to all first and second year undergraduates, including details on the eligibility requirements and a brief application form asking for enough data to a) check eligibility and b) ascertain their preferences of sector and location. Students were asked to present evidence of their eligibility, and it is noteworthy that none referred to their social class. In a matter of days 181 applications had been received, of whom 29 were not eligible. Students were given guidance on securing their own placement, and CSCS staff began to broker with employers on their behalf, from existing employer contacts. As students were confirmed as participants, a careers consultant worked through 'preparing for placement' materials with them. Funding was allocated on a 'first come, first served' basis. As a result, students who were slower to secure their own placement or whose interests were harder to match with a centrally brokered placement were unable to access the funding. This resulted in 127 unplaced students, of whom 17 withdrew when they found alternative work experience.

The participants

As a result of this pragmatic process and mixed economy, the overall participation in the project is summarised in table 2. The totals are higher than the total number of placed students as some met several criteria.

Table 2:

| Criteria | Placed |
|---------------------------|--------|
| BME | 4 |
| Mature student | 2 |
| Disability | 1 |
| Financial Support | 17 |
| No prior experience of HE | 9 |

Comparing this data with student records, the majority did not have a socio-economic class recorded. It is significant to note that if we had only publicised the scheme to those with the appropriate recorded SEC data, most of our participants would not have heard about it.

12 students sourced their placements themselves and 13 were sourced by us, using existing employer contacts.

Students' positions pre- and post- placement

In the light of the context outlined earlier, we felt the scheme would be of most benefit to students whose horizons for action were narrowed by their background, who lacked the agency associated with careerist/instrumentalist approaches,

hence not having sought work experience to this point. However, we were struck by the confidence of the students who were placed in their abilities to succeed in their chosen fields. Students' comments that 'I am going to excel' or 'I know I have the needed drive ambition and multi specialism background to be a good lawyer'. They had accepted the supply side discourse of employability as an individualised concept based on simply possessing the 'right' characteristics (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006, Wilton, 2011).

Given the barriers to work experience we have outlined, as well as our expectations about their orientations, we were surprised by how many of the students placed did actually have prior work experience. Indeed, some had previously self-sourced unpaid work experience at a similar level in their target sector and knew exactly what they wanted to achieve with this next period of work experience, suggesting that their background was not a barrier to action.

The initial support involved encouraging students to consider what they had to offer an employer and the strengths and qualities they would be taking into their placement. Several of the students struggled with articulating their existing strengths, or learning goals for the placement, prior to the internship, and this was an area given considerable attention in the pre-placement activities.

In post-placement follow up it was reported that all the students planned to stay in touch with contacts made and had developed both networks and networking skills. Some were offered further opportunities after the internship. Students' reports on the outcomes of the placement focused on their learning about the sectors they worked in and growth in confidence. However, once the internship was completed they were hesitant about articulating specific next steps or about reflecting on what they had learned about themselves. A typical comment here focuses on sector knowledge gained *'My placement at X had quite a large impact on me and my career planning despite only being a week long.....The placement helped me to confirm that a career in investment banking is definitely right for me.'*

Two case studies of contrasting experiences are summarised below:

DE gained an unpaid internship in media through the scheme as she was in receipt of university funding. She had not used CSCS previously but her family were very supportive of her aspirations. Her confidence in her ability to succeed in media grew during the internship and she was particularly pleased with her own improvement in her ability to undertake some of the tasks which initially seemed quite daunting. As a follow up to the internship she planned to arrange a discussion with a careers consultant.

RS, a first generation HE student, gained an internship in law. She had not used CSCS previously. Her family were supportive of her aspirations and she was able to articulate her strengths prior to the internship. Her confidence in succeeding as a barrister was very high despite its extremely competitive entry route. Following the internship she was asked to return showing she had made a good impression and giving her a contact for references and further experience in the future. However, she was less sure that she wanted to be a barrister as the solicitors she had met had told her how hard it was and so her confidence had dropped. This shows the impact on aspirations and confidence from the worldview of those encountered on placement, particularly when the student has not been able to critique those perspectives. Six months later, her perspective remains altered, although her rationale changes:

The scheme really helped shape my career plans - as a result of the work experience I undertook I have complete altered my plans for the future. Comparing the experience within the solicitors' firm to that I have had with barristers enabled me to realise I would prefer to work in a team environment, having more client contact and really getting to know clients well throughout an issue from start to finish - something which solicitors are far more able to do than barristers...Thus the placement was invaluable in helping shape my career planning. I am currently going through the interview stage at numerous city law firms and I don't think I would have got this far in deciding that is what I want to do without the experience.(RS)

For other students at earlier stages in their career decision making, and who approached the scheme with no target sectors in mind, positive outcomes were reported more generically

Doing the work experience helped me to decide to have a gap year and gain some more experience in order to then be able to make a more informed decision about what field of work I would like to go into. The work experience enabled me to identify some of the jobs that interest me less than others, a process which has helped me to realise that I shouldn't rush my decisions about what jobs to apply for. (KW)

These confirm the different ways that internships can be experienced and highlight the importance of structured follow up and reflection on placements in order to capture learning.

Non participants

The process by which the scheme evolved, with a large group registering interest and then a 'first come, first served' model for either applying for a brokered place or finding one's own placement, meant that once the initial 25 bursaries had been allocated, there were 110 students left unplaced.

Some of these had not responded to follow up communications from us, particularly once term had ended, but others had sought placements and lost out on competitive processes.

These students were followed up in October 2010. Of these 110, 39 responded to our follow up, reporting that 9 had found alternative work experience over the summer, but 30 had not. Breaking that down according to prior experiences:

3 found some work experience and had done some previously (a **continuation** of active engagement)

6 found work experience without the scheme although had not had any previously (a **breakthrough**)

11 did not find work experience but had done some previously (**step back**)

19 did not find any and had not done any previously (still on the **starting blocks**)

Given the original scheme objectives, the 30 students in the 'step back' and 'starting blocks' groups would have potentially benefited the most. A more targeted approach at the outset would have enabled us to focus on them, and our recommendation for future schemes is that they are ring-fenced for those with no prior work experience. Consideration would need to be given to recruitment on those grounds and verification of such claims.

In the follow up, many of the non-placed students expressed interest in further targeted support from Student Careers and Skills in finding work experience in the future. As a result, a programme was designed to bring them in to the support offered by the Centre, beginning with an initial workshop. However, despite positive sign up, attendance was poor and participation erratic. Feedback indicates that these students are not ready to engage in a self-directed way with the services we offer. We would need to offer more intensive and structured support to engage them and move them on. This highlights a critical point for services on a supported self-sourcing model, that precisely those who need the most support can be the least likely to access it.

Conclusions

Overall, there is evidence that the scheme had a positive impact on the students who participated, and that the guidance offered before and after were useful in supporting their learning. We cannot predict what their experience would have been without the financial support. However, for many, their prior work experience shows they were already engaged and proactive.

The positive response to a targeted scheme has proved influential on colleagues who were concerned about the ethics of targeting. We had only one complaint from a student not in the target group about the scheme. However, it has flagged up ongoing practical considerations, such as:

- how to extract accurate data from students records,
- how to discuss socio-economic background with clients in an objective and non-patronising way, and
- how to validate self-reported data such as prior work experience and parental experience of higher education.

Moreover, the scheme highlights difficulties of working with class as a means of engaging with individuals and shows how other criteria such as family income, whilst not a perfect substitute, make for easier targeting.

The funding mechanism required a rapid response to a complex and dynamic inequality, which led to the use of existing infrastructure for quick implementation. Although in the current economic climate there are unlikely to be similar funding initiatives, lessons can be learnt from this initiative at both institutional and sector level so that more sustained interventions can be developed.

The rapid response to this scheme from students who met our criteria yet had undertaken previous unpaid work experience in their chosen sectors, show the difficulty of targetting support. Acknowledging that a characteristic can influence career trajectories at macro level does not easily help us identify the individuals in greatest need of support. This requires a more nuanced understanding of the individual learner.

The wider evaluation of all the HEFCE funded schemes which considered the undergraduate internships alongside similar programmes with no explicit social mobility focus shows that:

Schemes open to all are most likely to be accessed by socially advantaged students

Work experience needs to be part of a structured intervention in order to be of maximum benefit (Oakleigh/CRAC, 2011)

This experience, then, is further argument for the targetting of resources on providing structured schemes for those with no prior work experience, who are unable to access the experience that would be most beneficial. For some of these students, a step towards a brokerage model may be required. Work-related learning can be managed in ways that increases social mobility, but to do this it must be explicitly included as a consideration in the current 'employability' of our students.

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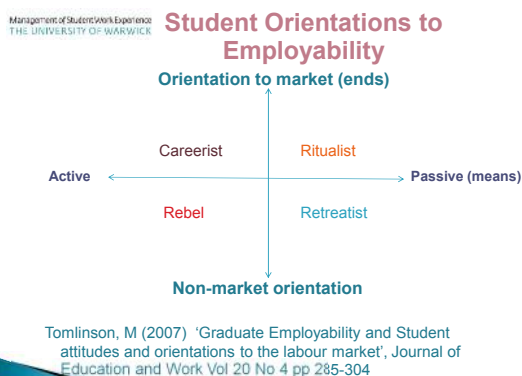
Widening Participation, Employability and Work-Related Learning : What Works

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ASET Conference, September 2011

Session overview

- Employability, work experience and social mobility: unpacking the terminology.
- What does it mean for individuals? Shaping services to respond
- HEFCE funded undergraduate internships: an overview of one programme
- Lessons learnt
- Discussion



| Model | Supported Self-sourcing | Brokerage |
|---------------|--|--|
| Advantages | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student leads the process, as autonomous, independent learner Student develops abilities to negotiate the labour market themselves, which can be applied in the future Consistent with support models for graduate transitions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can be easily targeted at specific sectors or groups of students Easier for both employers and students Direct engagement with employers can influence their practices |
| Disadvantages | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Confident and engaged students are more likely to access the support Any employer discrimination is unseen and therefore cannot be challenged | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Burden of time passes to the institution – costly to run. Unsustainable level of support to offer |

HEFCE Undergraduate internships: a practical response

- Rapid response required: May-Sept 2010
- Joint Warwick:Birmingham bid = 25 Inplace + places each
- At Warwick: incomplete data on socio-economic background
- financial support & family experience of HE used as substitutes for SEC. (Ethnicity, age and disability also used)
- Promoted widely – 181 applications over a weekend
- Placed on first come: first served basis
- Pre- and post- placement one to one careers adviser support
- 12 self-sourced; 13 brokered

- Students with low levels of prior professional level work experience
- Perhaps less confident
- Lack of previous engagement with Careers Services
- Support needed with placement planning & reflection
- Significant levels of previous unpaid work experience – usually secured by themselves
- High levels of confidence: 'I am going to excel'
- Lack of previous engagement with Careers Services
- Support needed with placement planning & reflection

Expectations

Realities

How students presented their eligibility:

| Criteria | Placed |
|---------------------------|--------|
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Non-participants

110 students left unplaced & followed up in Oct 2010. 39 responded : 9 had found alternative work experience over the summer, but 30 had not.

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Lessons learnt

Students with the most to benefit will need the most support

Sector-wide evaluation shows:

- Schemes open to all are most likely to be accessed by socially advantaged students
- Work experience needs to be part of a structured intervention in order to be of maximum benefit (Oakleigh/CRAC, 2011)

Acknowledging that a characteristic can influence career trajectories at macro level does not easily help us identify the **individuals** in greatest need of support. This requires a more nuanced understanding of the individual learner.

Issues to consider:

- ▶ how to extract accurate data from students records,
- ▶ how to discuss socio-economic background with clients in an objective and non-patronising way, and
- ▶ how to validate self-reported data such as prior work experience and parental experience of higher education.

Thank for you for listening

For further queries:
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