ASET Research Bursary

International Work Placements: Linking Experiences to Future Career Aspirations

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Executive Summary

Aims:

This research project explores the experiences of students who have undertaken an international work placement. In doing this, it looks at how students articulate the skills that they have learnt on their placement, and methodologies that can be used to best support students to realise the skills that they have developed.

Method:

Semi-structured interviews took place with 20 students from a university in the East Midlands. These students had undertaken an international work placement for a minimum of 6 months and graduated between 2015 and 2018. Interviews were conducted using a peer-to-peer interview method and interviews lasted approximately one hour.

Findings:

All students interviewed expressed highly positive views of their international work placements and all seemed to use the opportunity for immersing themselves in local environments and cultures and travelling. International work placements enabled students to develop a variety of skills, namely confidence, independence, open-mindedness and communication. The placements had strong impacts on the aspirations of students, who tended to be much more open to working abroad in the future and thought about the type of company that they aspire to work for.

Support:

Students' need for support decreases throughout their placement journey. The need for support is greatest before they leave, such as requiring help with finding a placement and is the least when they return from their placement. This is because they develop a greater sense of independence while on placement. Consequently, it is important for support strategies to respect the significance of independence for these students.

However, there were aspects in which students felt they could be better supported. For example, students would have liked more help in finding international work placements and would value a greater quality of contact with Placement Supervisors, such as meeting them in person before they go on placement. Furthermore, students pointed to the under-utilised resource of peer-to-peer support as being one of the main areas of support which they would find useful, particularly for advice on personal aspects, such as making friends abroad.

Introduction

Context

Students are increasingly viewing their degree classification as not being 'enough' to secure graduate employment (Tomlinson 2008), with the labour market perceived as becoming ever more difficult to enter into. The rising expectation for students to be 'work-ready' when they graduate (Tymon 2013) is further heightened by the 'saturation' of graduates in the labour market (Tomlinson 2007). Additionally, there is growing pressure for graduates to be able to demonstrate certain competencies for the global workplace such as communication skills (Rundstrom 2005; Williams 2005) and to be able to operate in a variety of different cultural contexts (Jones 2013). These soft skills are seen to be developed outside the formal degree programme. This has led to students feeling the need to utilise work placements and international experiences to help them to be successful in the labour market (Findlay et al. 2012).

However, there has been a lack of research that looks at students' experiences of international work placements. This research addresses this gap by looking at how international work placements may shape students' career decisions and the ways in which students need support for these types of placements.

The research focuses on students who have done an international work placement for a minimum duration of 6 months. It looks at the experiences of students throughout their placement journey and examines the impact that international work placements may have on students' career aspirations. It focusses on how these experiences have implications for the support provided to students, and if there is anything that students feel could be done to support them throughout their placement process. This is important if students are to be able to make the most of the skills that they have developed on placement and to maximise future opportunities, both inside and outside of the workplace.

Aims

This research project has three main aims. These are to:

1. Explore the experiences of students who have undertaken international work placements, and examine the impact that this has on their career aspirations
2. Examine how students understand the skills learnt on placement
3. Discuss the methodologies of best supporting students on return from international work placements

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 Loughborough University alumni who graduated from 2015 to 2018 and undertook an international work placement for a minimum duration of 6 months. We obtained a 60:40 male to female ratio and spoke with students across a variety of Schools, including a mix of vocational subjects (such as Engineering) and non-vocational subjects (such as Geography). 70% of the placements were in Europe, and the remaining 30% were situated in Asia, Africa and South America. All participants names have been anonymised in the research.

Participants were recruited using a variety of methods, including email, advertisements on social media, and using direct messaging to contact alumni on LinkedIn. A peer-to-peer interview method was used to speak to participants. Peer-to-peer means that the researcher was similar in age and a recent University alumnus. This provided a useful dynamic between participants and the researcher, as it formed a common ground and made it easier for participants to share more critical thoughts regarding support from the University. Interviews lasted approximately 1 hour and took place mainly using Skype, but also by telephone and one face-to-face. All interviews were transcribed.

Interviews were analysed using a discourse analysis that looked for repetition of ideas and the interlinkages between these ideas. These repetitions were grouped into codes which were used to analyse the transcripts. The findings below present indicative quotes from the results.

Findings

1. Experiences

All students interviewed expressed highly positive views of their international work placements. This was expressed both in terms of being inside and outside the workplace.

Inside the Workplace
Students felt that their placements had provided them with an invaluable opportunity to gain experience in the workplace and to practice skills that they cannot develop in a university environment, such as using certain specialist software, interacting with clients and learning how to conduct themselves in a professional setting. For example, Jamie highlighted:

> *"working in Java [computer programming language] I learnt quite a lot…and I wasn't shied away from doing difficult things, I was given things to do and just expected to do it, which I think was quite beneficial."* (IT role, Malaysia, Graduated 2016).

Although the experience of the workplace varied between the students, depending on sector, the role and the size of the workplace, all students gained experience of both key soft skills and sector specific skills.

This experience had an impact on their work ethos. Many students explained that doing their placement abroad exposed them to different working cultures and values. For example, not working beyond working hours and using their lunch hour to have lunch with and socialise with colleagues. Some suggested that they brought this back into their final year, becoming more able to concentrate for longer periods of time during the day, but then to not work during the evening and have a clearer 'work-life' distinction. As Georgia highlighted:

> *"it made me a lot more relaxed going into the final year, and that just made my whole final year experience a lot better because I know so many people that were really stressed and kind of you know in that same mindset that I was in my second year. But I think in Denmark that really changed."* (Design role, Denmark, Graduated 2018).

Outside the Workplace
All of our respondents used their placement as an opportunity to immerse themselves in local environments and cultures. However, this did vary between locations particularly in terms of whether language presented a barrier to interactions. For example, students took

part in cultural events and celebrations, attended local events such as running clubs and coffee mornings, and travelled within and outside of the country's boundaries, often with friends that they had met on their placement. These activities provided the students with an opportunity to learn more about the culture of the country that they were in, providing an invaluable opportunity to develop intercultural skills. In some instances, this also involved finding out about cultures beyond that of where they were:

> *"I kind of just signed up to like the group event on InterNations [expat social website] and like we just met up in the morning and we drove up to the mountains, did like a tour of like the coffee farms and stuff. We got to bring back our own coffee beans which was really cool. And then they er, drove us back. And it was all like a mix of like Brazilians, Chileans, Swedes, Germans, Dutch people."* (Nicholas, Project Management, Colombia, Graduated 2018).

Often, students described their international work placement as being the 'best thing' that they had done and that, if given the opportunity, is something that they would do again. When asked whether doing an international work placement is something that they would recommend to other students, or for the advice that they would give to other students who are thinking of doing one, all participants responded that it is something they would highly recommend doing:

> *"[an international work placement] was probably one of the best things I have ever done. Like a lot – honestly, yeah"'* (Jake, PR role, Netherlands, Graduated 2018).

2. Aspirations

Working abroad
Nearly all respondents reported that doing an international work placement made them more open to working abroad in the future. Some had already secured work overseas, whilst others were looking or at least knew that they would be open to returning at some point. For example, as Lauren told us:

> *"I think it's definitely given me more motivation to work abroad again, because I really do want to work abroad again"* (Lauren, Engineering role, Malaysia, Graduated 2017).

Career trajectory decisions
A few graduates discussed that their placement has helped them to realise what type of career they might like to have. Some said that they would like to like to work in a different industry or in a different job to the one in which they did their placement. In this sense, their placement provided them with the necessary experience to help them decide what they might want to do in the future. As Ryan explained:

> *"I think it, it very much helps future employment and it very much helps you understand what you want to do in a career"* (Ryan, Design role, Germany, Graduated 2016)

Even for those who chose to remain in the industry in which they did their placement, it was suggested that their international work placement was key in helping to confirm their decision, and even that their placement has enabled them to secure employment upon graduating within this industry. For example, as Matthew said:

> *"to be able to actually go out and get that experience…yeah, in the middle of the degree, I think it is super important. I don't think that I would have the job that I have now if I hadn't of done it"* (Matthew, IT role, Germany, Graduated 2017)

This suggests that international work placements may be key in helping students to make decisions about their career pathways and trajectories. It also indicates the high regard in which employers appear to view international work placements.

Type of company

Having experience in a working environment seemed to have a strong impact on some students in regard to the size of the company that they would like to work for in the future. For example, some working for smaller businesses said that they would prefer to work in a multi-national corporation as they felt it would be more exciting, whereas others working for larger companies said they are interested in working for small companies as they felt they would have greater responsibility over projects.

3. Skills Developed

Overall, students suggested that they had benefited substantially from doing an international work placement and that doing one had enabled them to develop a variety of skills. The main areas in which students were able to advance were confidence, independence, open-mindedness and communication.

Key skills developed

1. Confidence

2. Independence

3. Open-mindedness

4. Communication

Confidence

The most important aspect developed by students was confidence. This was often attributed to students having to look after themselves and make friends in a completely different environment, especially because it was often the first time that they had lived away from their families, other than at University. For example, as Jake said:

> *"I think I definitely learnt a bit more self-confidence and stuff, for a start, because obviously I went out there by myself, you know"* (Jake, PR role, Netherlands, Graduated 2018)

Not only did the experience of living and working abroad help students to develop confidence in their personal lives, but also within the workplace. It was expressed by participants that this encouraged them to use their initiative and to believe in their own skills and abilities in a professional setting.

Independence

This took place in two main aspects: transition to adulthood and independence in the workplace. In many cases, their international work placement was the first time that students had lived away from their parents apart from at University and had to learn to manage living in a foreign country on their own. Participants suggested that although this was a daunting prospect at first, the experience has enabled them to develop a much stronger sense of independence. As Hannah explained:

> *"I noticed that I had become a lot more independent and I was like surprised at that because I had always been quite…shy and maybe taken the easy option […] So yeah, realising that actually I can survive on my own and in another country – that was a big one, I guess"* (Hannah, Design role, Germany, Graduated 2017)

Open-mindedness

A few students suggested that working with people from a variety of different backgrounds and cultures encouraged them to become more open-minded about how they work and their outlook on life. They suggested that this was often transformative in the way that they continued to approach their personal and working lives. As Georgia remarked:

> *"I'm pretty kind of relaxed when it comes to other people and just other experiences and cultures, but I think that definitely made me a bit more…Because there were other cultures that I've never…like I'd never met anyone from Romania before and then I ended up living with some or…and just…even just learning about other countries that I maybe had never visited"* (Georgia, Design role, Denmark, Graduated 2018)

Communication

Learning to communicate in a professional setting was another aspect in which students felt they were able to develop. This was particularly the case when students were working in places where English was not commonly spoken. This was because participants said that they had to focus more on expressing themselves clearly and concisely, such as in Lauren's case:

> *"you had to be so clear with what you were saying, because English is not their first language… So you have to be concise and clear with what you're saying. So that was a very good skill to learn*" (Lauren, Engineering role, Malaysia, Graduated 2017)

4. Support

As students move through the placement journey, students suggested that the need for decreases. The need for support is greatest before students go on placement, such as requiring help with finding and preparing for going on placement, and is the least when students return from the placements into their final year of university. However, there were also practical aspects of placements and the return to university where students said it would have been helpful to receive more support.

Before Placement

Students suggested that there is a lack of focus on international work placements and that it would be helpful to know more information about doing one, to receive help in finding international placements specifically:

> "*I would have found it helpful while I was studying to have…erm…to have had help in finding a placement, because I was getting stressed about not finding one*" (Hannah, Design role, Germany, Graduated 2017)

Students often utilised personal connections to secure an international work placement, something which may prevent students who don't have connections from undertaking international work placements. This points to a particular need for students to receive support with helping them to prepare for finding and applying for these placements – not only in terms of being successful in their applications, but also for understanding the highly competitive nature of the placement market and providing strategies to help students navigate through this.

Participants also said that it would have also been useful to receive more guidance from the University in terms of helping them to prepare for going abroad, such as finding accommodation and sorting out visas. Living in a different country, without knowledge of how to secure accommodation, set up bank accounts and other administrative details, was often cited as a key source of anxiety for students before they went abroad for their placement.

Students also highlighted that a greater quality of personal connection between them and their placement supervisor was seen to be important for students to be able to reach out for further support, particularly if students had an issue whilst on placement that they needed help with. As Aaron explained:

> "*'cause otherwise it is just sort of like I am speaking to a stranger and 'I have never met you or anything'…it is a bit odd…asking you for advice or help, or whatever*" (Aaron, IT role, Switzerland, Graduated 2016)

While the students enjoyed the sense of independence while on placement, they felt that meeting their placement supervisor before they left the University would help them be able to approach the University if they needed assistance.

During Placement

Students relished feelings of independence while on placement, with this making them confident in their ability to negotiate the world of work. As Sarah explained, having too much contact from the University whilst she was on her placement would have been detrimental to her experience and the sense of independence that she had developed:

> "*I think if they had been contacting us more and more enforced I would have just felt like a student still*" (Sarah, Policy role, Belgium, Graduated 2017) .

However, knowing that the support network of the University was there was important to the students. This made them feel more able to do their placement abroad and to move out of their 'comfort zone'. As Lauren told us:

> "*With having uni's like backing and having the support of the uni, it's much easier to do like a leap into a placement for a year somewhere else, as opposed to doing it when you graduate and you're all on your own.*" (Lauren, Engineering role, Malaysia, Graduated 2017).

Therefore, students valued having a 'friendly face' to turn to. For example, as Chloe explained:

> "*I think it would have been nice if I had just halfway through my placement just someone sort of checking up. Not really to sort of like, with a form or anything, just someone to ask – 'how is it going?'*" (Chloe, Design role, Germany, Graduated 2018)

The participants also highlighted the need for consistency among advisors. While abroad, some students had multiple visits from their supervisors while others had what they described as minimal Skype contact. While the level of support offers between programmes, it should be noted that students do discuss the support they receive amongst themselves and compare their experiences to that of students from other Universities.

After

On return from placement, due to the greater sense of independence developed from their placements, many students suggested that that they were responsible for recognising their own skills and that there is not much that the University should do. When asked whether there is anything that the University can do to better support students upon their return to their final year, Sarah explained:

> "I think if you haven't learnt how to use your skills yourself whilst on placement, and apply that to your […] work and your degree, you have probably not learnt enough!" (Sarah, Policy role, Belgium, Graduated 2017)

However, a few participants reported that they were not notified of key information about their courses, such as changes to module structure and information about choosing modules for their final year. However, these suggestions for support were focussed on practical issues, rather than on helping them to articulate the skills that they had learnt during their placement.

Conclusion

To conclude, international work placements are important in shaping students' decisions about their careers and in helping them to develop key work-based and personal skills. Whilst students would like greater support from the University before they go on their placement, the sense of independence that they gain leads to them requiring and wanting less support upon their return. These findings have important implications for how support might best be delivered to students before, during and after their placement. The main implications are outlined in the next section.

Key recommendations

1. Support strategies should respect the importance of independence to students

2. More focus on international placements and help in finding them

3. Value the quality of personal contact with Placement Supervisors

4. Utilise peer-to-peer support

Implications

1. *Respect the importance of independence*

Support strategies should respect the importance of independence for students who have done an international work placement, given that this is one of the aspects enhanced by living and working abroad. This suggests that students would prefer to be able to draw upon formal support as and when they need it, rather than to have set support structures provided to them regardless of how their placement was going.

2. *More focus on international work placements and help in finding them*

Students said that it would be beneficial for international work placements to receive greater coverage on placement bulletins and advertisements, as well as to receive direct support in helping them to find a placement abroad. This would help more equitable access to international work placements.

3. *Value the quality of personal contact with Placement Supervisors*

Although it is important for strategies to complement the greater level of independence that students develop during their placement, students wanted to have a greater quality of

personal contact with their Placement Supervisor throughout their placement journey. Even for participants who independence was one of the most important aspects developed, students would have liked to have been more familiar with their placement supervisors, particularly before they went and to have the same person throughout the process.

4. Peer-to-peer support

The provision of support available to students throughout their placement journey could be improved by linking students up with alumni or final year students who have done a placement abroad, ideally in the same country. This was mentioned in particular by a few students, who said that it would have helped to ease concerns with aspects such as making friends and knowing where to look for accommodation. Therefore, not only could this be an important way of providing practical support, but also support that they would not necessarily approach the University for, such as for social aspects and queries. As Harry explained:

> *"I think it would have been fantastic if I'd just had someone that I could call up and be like 'er, listen mate, 'I'm struggling with the social aspect. Like, what did you do – how did you go around it?' you know. Otherwise – 'cause I knew the University was there if I needed to speak to someone about professional, you know, something work-related, but it would have been cool to have someone to speak to about the whole experience, in general, really"* (Harry, Design role, Switzerland, Graduated 2016)

Utilising peer-to-peer support would not only benefit current students, but also alumni by enhancing their opportunities to continue to the skills that they learnt on placement by reflecting on their experiences with current students. This could also help to strengthen the relationship between current and previous students, and potentially between industry and the University.

Future directions for research

Although this research has been directed towards students' experiences and perceptions of international work placements, where is more room to understand the particular challenges that students face when deciding to do a placement abroad, as well as how aspects of social difference, such as gender, may influence their decisions, access, or experiences.

Our key recommendation is for the formulation of peer-to-peer support networks for international work placements. However, research into the demand for these networks prior to placement and how they could operate during and after placements is needed to explore their effectiveness.

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