Attempting to build graduates’ capacity towards global employability

RUTH HELYER

Department of Academic Enterprise, Teesside University, Middlesbrough, United Kingdom.

Higher Education graduates have traditionally been highly sought after as employees. However, the current situation globally is that new graduates are finding it more difficult to obtain graduate level work, and often impossible to enter the sectors they were aiming at. Together with subject-specific skills all graduates need to be able to draw on generic, transferable skills such as those developed via work-based learning, skills like reflection, flexibility, adaptability, integrating and making connections.

This paper examines a Graduate Intern Programme in its third year at a UK university and attempts to measure its impact on the graduates' employability skills as well as the impact on the University's building and enhancement of its relationships with businesses. From the available data some tentative conclusions are drawn around how such schemes compare to having these opportunities embedded into degree programmes, prior to graduation.

The scheme aims to build capacity in at least 3 ways, by: facilitating students thriving in the workplace; supporting local companies with a 12 week paid placement and developing the skills of academic staff in new areas such as interviewing graduates, liaising with companies, running development sessions, and evaluating the scheme.

Keywords: graduate employability, graduate internships, experiential learning, workplace skills.

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally higher education graduates have been employable due to their enhanced levels of knowledge and their well-rounded qualities; in the current global economy this seems no longer the case with many new graduates finding themselves underemployed. In the UK 18.9% of recent graduates are unemployed (ONS, 2012) with 47% accepting low-skilled employment (ONS, 2013). To address this higher education institutions are placing more employability-focused content in programmes of study; including embedded modules, ‘bolt-on’ modules and facilitated workplace experience via work-based projects, work placements, internships and similar arrangements with employers. Many higher education institutions offer internship opportunities during vacations, or at the programme's end. The value of work experience to graduates has long been established, via such mechanisms as sandwich courses in the UK and cooperative and work integrated learning in the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand; this paper examines how learning through experience in the workplace can contribute to enhancing graduate employability, including some data from the evaluation of a university internship scheme in the north east of England (2012/13 intake).

EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

The phrase ‘employability skills’ is used to refer to job-seeking skills, such as interview and CV enhancement techniques, but also the broad, non-specific abilities and attributes making an individual a desirable employee, such as: teamwork; communication skills; time-management; confidence; self-discipline, and, additionally, subject/sector/profession specific abilities. In 2007 Yorke and Knight proposed a detailed list of attributes, ‘...a set of achievements, understanding and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupation’ (Yorke and Knight, 2007, p. 158). However, it has now become more difficult to enter that ‘chosen occupation’ due to factors including: a global recession; youth unemployment; an ageing workforce and many more students entering higher education. In the UK participation rates for individuals up to the age of 30, have risen from 12% in 1979 to 30% in the early 1990s and 39% by 1999–00 to 49% in 2011–12 (Parliament briefing papers, 2013) and graduate job applications have increased by between 9–25% (High Fliers, 2014, p. 3).

It is predicted that graduate vacancies in the UK will increase by about 10.2% in 2014 (Garner, 2014), however this will still be within a highly competitive employment market. Workers are living, and remaining in employment, longer; by 2020 one third of the UK workforce will be over 50 (Houses of Parliament, 2011; Helyer and Lee, 2012), furthermore, by 2018 12.8% of those aged 15–24, worldwide, could be unemployed (ILO, 2013). Graduates will need to stand out to gain employment; one option is to use the experiential learning they gain from in-course
workplace experiences; the majority of top graduate recruiters prioritise employing graduates with work experience (High Fliers, 2014). Simultaneously, the world is changing rapidly, employees need to cope with and adapt to change, ‘...having the skills, attitudes and belief necessary to win a job, succeed in that role, and move on to an even more fulfilling role in the future’ (Adecco, 2012, p. 40). In *Boosting Employability Skills* the CBI (2012) report that, ‘businesses want graduates who not only add value but who have the skills to help transform their organisation in the face of continuous and rapid economic and technological change’ echoing Harvey with Green (1994) and Harvey et al. (1997), but now additionally emphasising the contemporary speed of economic and technological change. Benefiting from the opportunities on-going change brings demands certain kinds of individuals. Surveying employers in the North East of England about skills gaps and shortages (Helyer & Lee, 2010: 29) revealed they required graduates with technical, practical and sector-specific skills, as well as skills that cross sectors: customer handling, problem solving, team working, communication, critical thinking and leadership and management, together with timekeeping and work protocols.

THE TEESSIDE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE INTERNSHIP PROGRAMME

Many employers now offer paid vacation internships and industrial placements and university intern schemes can help to prepare students for such opportunities. It is predicted (High Fliers, 2014) that as many as 37% of 2014’s graduate-level jobs, at the top 100 graduate employers, will be offered to graduates known to the organisation, through already having worked there as an intern or placement student. In sectors like investment banking, up to 80% of graduate roles are given to graduates who had previously worked as an intern for the company (Briggs and Daly, 2012). A glance at the webpages of UK higher education institutions demonstrates the growing number now offering both students and graduates workplace experience schemes.

The Teesside University Graduate Internship Programme commenced in the academic year 2011/12 and comprises 12 weeks of paid workplace experience, together with a structured personal and professional development programme. Designed to help recent, unemployed graduates to learn from real-life work experience in a graduate level role, the programme aims to enhance employability skills and offer insights into business environments, etiquettes and crucial professional networks. The development days progress job-seeking skills, help with career choices and facilitate structured reflection. The internship programme also aims to generate local graduate-level jobs, helping with talent retention.

The University’s business-facing staff promote the programme to their business contacts, plus an external consultant actively engages new host organisations. This activity has the added bonus of introducing the University to companies they have not previously worked with; these may be marginal companies and often small to medium enterprises (SMEs). In 2013, 44 of the 87 host companies were SMEs. Employers interested in the programme devise a project for the intern and a summary of the graduate level job role. 2012–13 saw 152 projects put forward by 109 employers; their sectors included manufacturing, engineering, information, communication and technology, the arts, entertainment and recreation. Most companies specify skills in business and marketing, reflecting a national trend (HECSU, 2013, p. 9), computing and web, and media and journalism. More than half (59%) of all submitted proposals did not specify a named degree. 87 graduates from a range of backgrounds were interviewed and recruited (more than a 50% increase from 2011–2012). Almost half of the interns held an upper-second-class degree; furthermore 17 out of the 87 held a first-class degree. In the past, similar schemes may have targeted graduates needing extra support. In the current strained jobs market every job seeker needs support.

EVALUATING THE PROGRAMME

The research (March–April 2013) evaluated the experience of graduates and employers, as well as logistical issues. The methodology included: desk research; analysis of electronic records of student profiles; scrutiny of institutional Customer Relationship Management (CRM) tool, to confirm company details and histories; a student self-audit, the ‘Graduate Readiness Questionnaire’; an electronic survey to all host organisations; in-person employer interviews, and an evaluation day, including questionnaire, for all graduates. Quotations are numbered for anonymity.
FINDINGS

The majority of graduates (57%) described the programme as “enjoyable” and “useful”; naming “the workplace” the best aspect, “I felt I learned a lot just by doing the job” (Intern, R16), and, “It was great learning from industry professionals” (Intern, R49).

Reasons for applying to be an intern included: “to gain work experience” and “to develop employability skills”. Graduates realize that workplace experience boosts their *curriculum vitae*. 81% of the interns claimed that the job was as they had expected, but often more was involved, and occasionally noticeably more ‘stretching’ than anticipated, “I got to manage my own project and helped to develop some long-term strategies” (Intern, R11), and, “I thought I would be doing customer service and basic admin work but I was actually given an interesting variety of tasks (…) which really tested and developed my abilities” (Intern, R31).

At the evaluation day many graduates celebrated the chance to work with practitioners, with those who were incorporated into teams in the workplace, the most vocal about how authentic their experience felt. The graduate interns had all experienced HE projects at university, but the switch to a real workplace was palpable, allowing them to use their academic learning, “What I did in the workplace really built on my degree” (Intern, R38).

The interns were positive about the induction day and development workshops that focused on career management skills; personal development; self-awareness; purposeful reflection and teambuilding:

At first I didn’t understand why we were doing teambuilding activities with the other interns, rather than with our teams at work, however the messages from the activities undertaken as part of the development sessions were actually really useful at work (Intern, R12).

Over half of employers interviewed (56%) stated that the development sessions back at the University had been useful, with some recognising that they had contributed to improved skills and confidence, “They seemed to boost the intern’s confidence” (Host R23).

All interns, anonymously, completed a self-audit, the ‘Graduate Readiness Questionnaire’, before and after the 12 week work placement. The areas the graduates felt least confident about were: “I know where to look for jobs that would suit me”; “I know how and where to find out information about graduate employers”; and “I know how to write applications that will be successful”. These same areas showed the most improvement at the end of the programme, suggesting that the graduates received help where most needed. The areas the interns felt more confident about at the start were: “I am able to reflect on and appraise my own performance”; “I am aware of my own strengths and weaknesses”; and “I am confident that I will be able to deliver what is asked of me in a graduate job” and these showed very little, if any, improvement, suggesting that the programme offered a timely reality check:

The development sessions and skills tracking exercises were really useful, they helped me develop an awareness of what I was good at; it wasn’t necessarily what I thought! (Intern, R18).

From the final evaluation questionnaire, graduates identified ‘skills’, ‘experience’ and ‘confidence’ as the top three benefits of participating, “I have developed new skills in a professional capacity” (Intern R34).

More than one quarter of interns secured full time employment (youth unemployment is 14.1% in Tees Valley; 7.2% nationally, TVU, 2014). More than half of these jobs were with the host organisation, with 9% gaining places on high profile graduate schemes with national companies: “the Teesside Internship launched my career”. The programme aims to advance the graduates’ profiles and market them to employers as ‘first choice’, “This is the first Teesside Graduate I have employed and I am very impressed. If all Teesside graduates are like this I would like to employ more” (Host organisation). 7% of the interns had their placement extended, 2% remained as volunteers, at voluntary sector organisations. Whilst recruiting graduates right across the spectrum some of the real success stories come from students with low entry tariff points and degree classifications, who secured permanent employment by the end of their internship. Student A entered the university with 100 tariff points and graduated with a ‘pass’ degree; through working as an intern on the programme, with the marketing team for a global company, the graduate was offered, and accepted, a full-time permanent position as a marketing analyst.

The benefits of the experiential learning the graduate gained from the workplace was very apparent, “I learned such a lot by actually undertaking the role” (Intern R40)
CONNECTIONS WITH OTHER SCHEMES

Higher education work-based learning programmes for employed students have been celebrating the benefits of experiential learning for some years. The students on these programmes, with titles like ‘work-based studies’ or ‘work-based and negotiated learning’, bring their experiential learning to university with them. Their prior and current learning can be articulated, evidenced and accredited via higher education. University learning is progressed by different learning methods; learning in the workplace is ‘situated, participatory and socially mediated’ (Eames and Bell, 2005) and shares new knowledge. Conventionally universities were regarded as knowledge repositories and associated with instructive teaching methods, however in the 21st century, graduates will need to apply their learning in increasingly complex ways. The Teesside programme emphasizes connections to the graduates, connections between their past, current and future learning; connections between their degree content and the ‘real’ world. Experiential learning connects learning to activity, ‘learning and doing cannot be separated and therefore to use knowledge to its fullest potential it must be implemented, performed and enhanced as part of a synergy’ (Helyer, 2010, p. 21). Higher education institutions need to be future-focused, aligning their learning opportunities to students’ and employers’ realities, ‘the higher education experience should be a holistic one, embracing the widely varying contexts in which knowledge is produced, gained, built upon and used’.’ (Helyer 2011, p. 103).

Stephen Billett (2011) reiterates the power of experiential learning and emphasises the breadth of its application, to include, co-operative learning, work integrated learning, work-based learning, internships and work placements. The USA National Commission for Coop Education defines co-operative education as, ‘structured educational strategy that integrates class studies with learning through productive work experience, related to the student’s academic or career goals’ (USA National Commission for Coop Education, 2010). Internships and co-operatives are well established in the United States higher education system. ‘Institutions in the USA in particular show a strong belief in the benefit of internships with some institutions requiring students to complete a minimum of one internship during their studies to pass their course’ (BIS 2011, p. 96). For example, students from Drexel University, USA, graduate with 18 months of professional experience, having spent half of each academic year of their three-year programme in the workplace. Canada, Australia and New Zealand also provide interesting examples of innovative co-operative education and work-integrated learning. Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand offer a Bachelor of Sport and Recreation degree that combines two days in industry (350 hours per year) simultaneously with two days of university attendance. The aim is to provide the right environment for students to ‘learn through work in an authentic experience’ (Fleming and Hickey, 2013). The comments made by the students in New Zealand are repeated by the findings of the Teesside evaluation, comments like, ‘it felt challenging’, ‘thrown in at the deep end’, ‘supervising others’, with good points, such as, ‘being accepted’, ‘meeting people I would never have met’, ‘working alongside experts’, ‘learning professional behaviours and tricks of the trade’, ‘being accepted as a member of a professional community’, and:

I learnt through moving outside my comfort zone and doing things I was not sure about. I also made myself do things, and attempt to do things, even though I sometimes wasn’t sure of what I was doing, but I did do that. It helped me to learn from my mistakes and how I could do things better (Student from Auckland University of Technology).

LEARNING POINTS

In a changing world ‘employability’ inevitably evolves as businesses realise that they need an adaptable workforce to endure continual challenges; employees must demonstrate a combination of subject-specific, generic and personal skills. A global economy in recession leads to employers having less permanent staff, and consequently expecting more from each employee, ‘I was surprised by the variety of tasks I was asked to undertake in the workplace’ (Intern). The programme alerted graduates to the expectation of multi-tasking. Many of the host organisations requested a graduate from outside their own sector, part of the demand for broader skills.

Several graduate respondents said they wished they had experienced the workplace earlier and there is growing evidence that it is worthwhile embedding some workplace experience in all HE programmes. According to Higson (2012) ‘internships should be seen as a way of gaining valuable employability skills while still at university’, while Trought (2012) takes this further by stating ‘the importance of gaining work experience at university has become a prerequisite for finding employment upon graduation’. The Teesside evaluation suggested that post-graduation schemes are useful too, again confirmed by Higson (2012), ‘such support should
also continue after students have graduated (…) a one stop shop offering graduates the best local paid and voluntary internships, for up to a year’. In the current financial climate employers would need to, at the minimum, partly fund such initiatives; employers responding to the Teesside evaluation were reasonably happy with this idea, with 57.1% saying they would be ready to fund, or partly fund, future interns, depending on various provisos.

Facilitating students learning in the workplace helps develop them into graduates who can operate as a catalyst within a business, transferring and creating knowledge, ‘…combining workplace learning and study as a means of knowledge acquisition and skill formation’ (Guile and Lahiff, 2013, p. 17). This happens via undergraduate and postgraduate study and, as with the Teesside graduate programme, can be enhanced by tailored development workshops. Both employers and graduates praised the workshops, in particular as they worked around reflection on action. It was felt that similar workshops could be offered in the vacation period so that more students could benefit from their content.

CONCLUSION

Graduates should leave higher education able to analyse and innovate – top graduates have always been attractive to employers. Due to global changes, including many more students graduating, the employment market is very competitive. Working patterns are changing and more graduates will create their own businesses and be self-employed, work in small niche markets and work in a portfolio style, therefore needing more than ever to have some experience of the workplace before they leave university. The evaluation evidences that the combination of academic study and work practice offers a springboard to future progression. As more longitudinal data is collected in-depth comparisons will be made with student destinations and progression into graduate jobs. The differences occurring between academic subject areas require closer attention, and lessons should continue to be learned from innovative practice globally. Offering an authentic working experience to all undergraduates, as Wilson claims, ‘helps students to be better in the context of their own lives and employment’, (Wilson, 2013).

There is a powerful argument for embedding experiential learning opportunities into all degree programmes, by integrating employability modules, skills and work-experience placements, to help students to leave university job-ready.

REFERENCES


National Commission for Coop Education (USA) – see WACE website: http://www.waceinc.org/


Copyright © 2014 Ruth Helyer

The author(s) assign to the Australian Collaborative Education Network Limited, an educational non-profit institution, a non-exclusive licence to use this article for the purposes of the institution, provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The author(s) also grant a non-exclusive licence to the Australian Collaborative Education Network to publish this document on the ACEN website, and in other formats, for the Proceedings of the 2014 ACEN National Conference. Any other use is prohibited without the express permission of the author(s).