Adding value to the work placement: working towards a professional qualification in an undergraduate degree programme

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Abstract

This article reviews the opportunity provided by the work placement year for human resource management students to gain professional membership of the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD). A case study approach is used to reflect on findings related to the first two cohorts. It concludes that the benefits of the opportunity to gain a separate professional qualification are twofold. First, it ties in closely with what appears is a more strategic career decision-making process on behalf of the student and, second, the CIPD qualification provides a robust framework for the placement period during this important stage of student studies.

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This article reports an innovation at the University of Glamorgan. Undergraduate students on the four-year Business Studies Degree undertake a one-year work placement which is intended to give the “students an appreciation of the overall business environment”. In the academic year 1997/98 the work placement year was reorganised so that students could prepare portfolios of work which could be submitted for the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD) qualification, Graduate CIPD. The innovation was continued into the academic years 1998/99 and 1999/2000 and was revalidated by the institute in the summer of 1999.

A new form of organisation for the work placement year was introduced which has been running for the last three years. This involved the introduction of a portfolio which has a dual purpose in that it not only records the student activities during the work placement but, in addition, can be also be used to gain graduate membership of the CIPD.

In this article a case study approach to this article is used to review the processes and outcomes, taking material that was readily available. It is part of the normal quality assurance procedures that information is gathered from students, placement providers and teaching staff in order to provide an evaluation of the programme from different perspectives. This article reports the outcomes of the process of annual monitoring using a range of sources of information. These include reports produced by students, student evaluations of their experiences, reports from the placement organisations and data relating to the take-up rate for the opportunity to follow a CIPD qualification concurrently with the degree.

The original intention was to offer the double qualification. However, the students and the placement providers reported that the portfolio approach to recording and reflecting on work placement experiences offered a range of unanticipated benefits, among which was a much improved structure to the placement.

Work placements

In theory, the work placement provides an ideal opportunity for developing the skills and characteristics that could increase the employability of graduates from the Business
Studies programme. Developing relevant skills away from a purely academic setting is in line with a number of pressures acting on all universities at the present time. Employers in the labour market have, for some time, been claiming that higher education (HE) should produce graduates who are flexible and able to cope with and respond to the changing complexities of commercial life (Handy, 1987; Constable and McCormick, 1987; Drucker, 1992; Dearing, 1997).

An often underutilised opportunity to address the issue of skills development during a Business Studies degree is the work placement year. The work placement year takes up 25 per cent of the degree scheme time and there is every reason to make maximum use of this resource. However, work placements have often been criticised for failing to provide a meaningful “real experience” (Cameron-Jones and O’Hara, 1992), while Kemp and Seagrove (1994) found the placement experiences to be ad hoc.

Bourner and Ellerker (1998) reported the findings of two influential reports on sandwich placements produced by the Department of Education and Science (RISE Committee, 1985). These reports identified two areas, which were critical for the success of the learning experiences of the placement students:

1. the integration between the placement and other academic periods of the course; and

2. providing a placement of sufficient breadth and variety.

This suggests that it is not only participation in the placement that is important, but as underlined by Ashworth and Saxton (1992) it is how the placement is managed and structured.

Several authors highlight the importance of the workplace supervisor (Bowie and Rippon, 1989; Winfield and Ellis, 1993; Ellis and Moon, 1998). Bourner and Ellerker (1998) suggest that where the tutorial arrangements are poor, students experience long periods of being left alone without support, are left dealing with conflicts at work and face unrealistic expectations regarding their level of responsibility. This suggests that to be effective the work placement must be better integrated with other related academic work and a clear line of responsibility must be defined or the work placement cannot be used to full advantage.

However, if the work placement is managed effectively, as Lomas (1997) points out, it can promote an atmosphere of “knowing how” and it is likely to encourage an approach to HE where students take an increasingly strategic view of their education. Cuthbert (cited by Schofield, 1999) argues that proper integration of the skills elements of the educational experience is essential if students were to achieve the “confident transfer” of skills. Such discussions put the work placement experience at the centre of an approach to education which has gained a great deal of ground in the last decade, that is, the recognition of work-based and transferable skills in HE.

In the general context of HE, one can identify a range of general pressures on institutions to deliver work-related skills, which are relevant to the workplace. Barnett (1994) argues that:

No longer are the pools of knowledge and expertise acquired in initial education sufficient for the new order. What is now required are the abilities to put the knowledge and expertise to use in unfamiliar circumstances … flexibility, communication skills and teamwork . . . Industry looks to individuals to be able to operate on their knowledge and deploy these operational capacities in the world of work.

The University of Glamorgan has embraced these trends, and they find clear expression in the Mission Statement and Strategic Plan 1997-2001 (University of Glamorgan, 1997). The university has pursued the objective of increasing employability through involvement with a number of initiatives, for example, the Higher Education for Capability (HEC) network. The Business Studies degree programme clearly provides particular opportunities for developing skills related to employability. However, staff on the programme have recognised a range of difficulties related to the administration of the work placement year that need to be resolved if the potential of work placement is to be realised.

In addressing this problem, a number of approaches have been tried. In an earlier attempt to provide structure to the work placement year it was thought that an NVQ in management could provide the framework. Unfortunately, the length of time available during the placement and the university resources required to sustain such an approach did not allow this to work as effectively in practice as it did in theory (Morgan, 1997). The present article reports the approach adopted when the NVQ in
management was considered relevant but rejected as too cumbersome to achieve given the resourcing and implications for staff support.

Developing the scheme

The scheme was developed in response to student feedback from earlier cohorts which suggested that the course could be made more attractive by providing an opportunity to gain professional membership of the CIPD. In response, the Human Resources Management (HRM) course team considered carefully the positioning, in the student marketplace, of the BA honours degree in Human Resource Management (HRM). One of the issues wrestled with, by marketers and those involved in strategy development, concerns the question of market forces and the value, in the marketplace, of educational products. “How is this (course) different? What will make students want to come to us instead of going to another provider?” It seemed to the course team that the principal reason for students choosing this course related to their desire to pursue a career in human resources (HR). Our task was to encourage them to elect to pursue their chosen course at this university. As the CIPD is by far the largest representative professional body in the UK in the HR field it seemed logical to explore how students might access membership via our course.

Following several meetings and the submission of an extensive proposal to the institute there followed a visit by a CIPD-appointed quality assurance panel. We proposed that students who complete the BA honours HRM degree and who had undertaken a work-placement year should produce a portfolio of evidence related to their workplace competence in the four key areas of:

1. employee relations;
2. development;
3. resourcing; and
4. reward.

If they pass the degree and complete the portfolio of evidence then the students should be eligible for graduate membership of the institute.

Usually CIPD approval is sought and given for programmes which are at a postgraduate post-experience level and not undergraduate. The notion of professional competence, as required by CIPD, is not attainable through a straightforward educational model because of the lack of opportunity to demonstrate application, by the student, of the knowledge gained in a real workplace. This proposal would not have been possible if two key pieces were not in place. First, CIPD required staff involved to have experience of assessing portfolios of evidence. The business school has a number of assessors who are experienced in working with the NVQ standards of portfolio assessment. Second, the business school already had in place a CIPD-approved centre for operating the Professional Assessment Scheme, which provides a route into professional membership via the portfolio/competence route. Business school staff who worked in these areas were co-opted to support the programme.

The outcome of the CIPD quality assurance panel visit was that the programme was approved to provide the proposed access to graduate-level membership of the institute.

Method of working

Placement periods are normally for a period of 12 months, but in practice may be considerably less, thus reducing the amount of actual time during which students may work on their portfolios of evidence. It is important that students are absolutely clear, as far as possible, about what the objectives are and what the plan of action is. To provide this clarification students receive a detailed briefing prior to the commencement of the placement. This briefing consists of an introduction to portfolio development and includes a discussion on what was meant by “work-related evidence”. In the normal course of events students are expected to maintain a work placement diary to which they are able to refer when writing their placement reflections.

The organisation of the portfolio and the form in which the students write their reflections on practice in the “personal report” are also considered. The aim of this report is to provide a guide to the students’ work-placement experience and allow them generally and specifically to describe their experiences. It was agreed to refer to the reflective narrative as a “personal report” because it is concerned with their experiences alone. The aim of this report is to set the evidence into context, review the work which
students have undertaken and capture the lessons learned. Importantly, it is a self-directed review that allows a critical reflection to be made on practice.

In order to support the students in the construction of their portfolio they are assisted with the preparation of an action plan and how to complete the detail of this plan. Individually, tutors and students prepared an action plan designed to operate during the placement. To review the content of this plan, and in order to deal with last-minute changes, an additional meeting between the lead tutor and the students is arranged on an individual basis. This is carried out immediately prior to the work placement. During the placement period there are two visits, by work placement tutors, and one visit back to the university by the student. The visit agenda includes a progress report on the portfolio of evidence.

On the students return, in September, a “return day” is organised, during which students meet with final year tutors to discuss module choices, the nature of the dissertation/management report option and placement feedback. One of the problems encountered was that there was no opportunity for students to reflect formally on the placement to the benefit of their peers. The feeling is that this discussion would be of interest and value to both the tutors and students alike.

The joint development of an action plan was essential to provide direction, focus and involvement of the host organisation. It formed both a control mechanism and the focus for the follow-up meetings. It was also used by the organisation for internal monitoring and feedback.

Integrated into the first-year modules and throughout the scheme the responsibility of “students as learners” is a theme. Part of this responsibility is encouraged through reflecting on practice. However, there is a noticeable difference between the nature of student reflection at undergraduate and postgraduate post-experience level, probably due to the wider range of personal experience associated with more mature students.

**Professional development**

The intention was for all students on the HRM scheme to be offered an HR-related placement. In practice this meant the placement was not necessarily directly in an HRM department but sometimes indirectly through the organisational devolvement of HR responsibilities to line managers. This development has allowed an effective HR-related experience to be undertaken in many more organisations than the course team had previously considered. For those who teach related subjects separately there were some serious messages concerning real work practices which are carried out in an integrated mode. It was also noted that the size of the organisation has considerable influence on how far this integration extended.

An additional dimension to the placement was identified by students who found their placement period based around a series of projects, rather than undertaking a specific job role. This presented unclear messages about the “artificial” view presented by their placement experience and the “real” job carried out by people working in the HRM arena.

Students found that a personal portfolio, which reflected the work placement year, had an intrinsic value of its own. They felt the method of working was transferable and could be utilised on other projects and in other settings. This has a number of implications for continuing professional development (Jones and Fear, 1994), for example through introducing the concept of lifetime learning and the development of personal transferable skills (Bradshaw, 1985). These issues, among others, have a growing currency for managers, as outlined by Canon and Taylor (1994).

Students found comparing work activities against the learning outcomes of the CIPD’s educational modules a reflective, developmental exercise in its own right which could have been further enhanced through a peer review of the outcomes. To augment the value of the work placement would require improved pre-planning and individual support from the adviser or tutor. This support could include developing further opportunities for students to “learn how to learn” which is an underlying component of the scheme from year one.

Collection of suitable evidence presented particular problems with organisations that were attempting to move away from producing and storing large amounts of paper. The portfolio approach is noted for its reliance on documented evidence.

Producing a portfolio of evidence was a new concept to all the students. However there are growing numbers of school leavers (14- to 19-year-olds) who are used to producing a personal portfolio and record of achievement,
which introduces the concepts of maintaining a record of experiences. Unfortunately, it does not provide an opportunity for the level of reflection and comparison between what they have learned and what they have experienced as offered by, for example, NVQs or through the CIPD form of learning outcomes approach. However, having experience of the portfolio approach would overcome some of the problems experienced by students on the mechanics of portfolio development.

An additional development of the school leavers and the portfolio approach relates to the number of 19-year-olds possessing General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) applying to universities which began to rise significantly from 1998 onwards. Approximately 95 per cent of the 29,000 advanced GNVQ students who applied to HE in 1999-2000 received offers of places (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, September 2000). However, there are few HE-related systems in place, which provide continuity of the portfolio method of working which will build on existing skills and complement, not compete with, traditional programmes. The increasing numbers of students entering HE will require institutions to seek innovative ways of dealing in a cost-effective manner with these increases, both qualitative and quantitative, and will force the educational agenda for changes in approach as fast as student markets develop.

To enable students to undertake the tasks which are capable of generating evidence across the range of expected outcomes requires careful planning and the full co-operation of the placement organisation. In order that the tutors can be sure that the students will be exposed to fruitful experiences, it is critical the work placement provides participants with access to developmental opportunities. These could be planned beforehand and included in the preparation of the action plan so that both the range and level of experience are appropriate for student development.

The placement organisation

Feedback received from the work placement supervisors reported “the structure offered by the CIPD modules provided a focus for the placement period”. All of the placement providers welcomed the possibility of the introduction of this type of structure on a more permanent basis. There were, however, serious concerns expressed about the ability or willingness on behalf of the organisation to commit further resources at a time when they were reducing overheads in other areas. The majority of students reported on the significant role played by their placement supervisor to give them access to development opportunities, in this instance, to practise the required skills.

The issue of “best practice” was raised by the organisations. Supervisors were concerned that some of their own work activities did not appear to fit in well with the conceptual models taught in the academic scheme and referred to by students. One example given was the lack of documented evidence of a procedure for ensuring effective equal opportunities in recruitment were being achieved. Examples such as this provide individuals with valuable insights into the everyday workings of a real HRM department, highlighting another strong reason for providing a formal platform for students to share these experiences.

Maintaining confidentiality of the evidence also raised concerns. This was simply resolved by introducing a vetting procedure, which gave the organisation an opportunity to remove or modify any evidence from the portfolio considered to be sensitive. This was assisted by clarifying the need to assess the outcomes of work-related activity and not being able to identify individuals or sensitive information. Special needs assessment arrangements could be used in cases of confidential information or work covered by the Official Secrets Act or the Data Protection Act.

The time taken to test and consolidate different approaches is as valuable for learners as achieving the end result. Depriving students of these opportunities may deny a number of benefits, which are offered by the portfolio approach. The learning, which is related to the development and assessment of a portfolio against a coherent set of learning outcomes, allows students time to reflect and consolidate and is an important feature to include and retain.

Assessment

It is important to consider the assessment methods associated with the portfolio approach, generally developed in association with NVQs, as they are outside the traditional
ways that academics have marked student output. “Staff development needs in this area are significant” (Walton, 1994).

The assessor who carried out the formal assessment reported a wide divergence in the types and form of the evidence presented. This was mainly due to the way the host organisation worked, which was confirmed in the feedback from the students and the placement company. The evidence presented was only a part of what might be expected in an NVQ portfolio which requires a specified range of statements to be addressed. The personal report and supporting evidence allowed the assessor to form an opinion related to the student’s future competence in an HRM-related role.

All students who were assessed had included reflections on their experiences during the placement and found the portfolio model provided an opportunity to record this in a way the usual form of work placement diary did not capture. The additional effort put into developing this work, considering the pressures under which the students find themselves at this stage of their degree, must not be understated.

The 1997 cohort consisted of 22 students. Of these, 21 chose to pursue the Grad CIPD option and of these 17 completed their portfolios before leaving university. The 1998 cohort consisted of 25 students, 20 of whom chose the Grad CIPD option. Of this group 14 have already submitted their portfolios with a small number (three) expected for submission before the end of 2000. The 1999 cohort consists of 22 students, 15 of whom have chosen the Grad CID option. It is too early for any of this last cohort to have submitted their completed portfolios. The sharp reduction in completions for the second cohort poses a question about the scheme and its ability to meet its intended targets.

The reasons for non-submission included:

- The placement organisation was not able or willing to provide all of the developmental opportunities sought to meet the scheme requirements.
- The organisation had developed ways of working which made it difficult for the student to present related documentation as evidence of notional good practice.
- Students’ involvement was at a low level and they were not able to develop the required skills in the key areas.

These present some fundamental problems to be overcome if the scheme is to be sustainable and thereby considered successful.

Discussion

There are fears that the rigour of academic standards may be threatened. The main concerns are a perceived movement away from more traditional assessment methods and that a competence-centred approach based on generalisation will replace specialisation, with the result that the content as well as the quality of academic schemes may be diluted. This pilot demonstrated an opportunity to add value to traditional forms of education.

The portfolio approach provided focus and structure to the work placement and gave students a permanent reminder of the time invested. It also introduced them, in a practical way, to the need to develop a range of personal transferable skills and the implications of these when competing for jobs. The established method of “work diaries” could be further developed and would be easier to manage, but the range of benefits that accrue offsets the problems presented by the portfolio approach. One of these benefits is access to membership of their chosen professional organisation.

As a result of student feedback and the school’s desire to capture more of the work placement experience a new core module has been introduced for the final year. Titled Change and Personal Development, it places emphasis on embracing “change, both social and organisational, by developing and critically appraising the student’s own personal learning and professional practice” (University of Glamorgan Business School, 1999). This is carried out through synthesising and articulating their new knowledge. Among the aims of the module are the promotion of self-direction and autonomy in learning, maintaining a reflective learning log and to evaluate critically the learning experiences.

The action plan started out as simply a method for recording who was responsible for undertaking what task and when. It also included consideration of the conditions under which the portfolio would be developed. Widening the scope of the plan and application to the placement year through the introduction of the module change and personal development has provided some of the most fundamentally important learning undertaken to this point in the students’ academic careers.

There are a growing number of “mature” students entering HE who are likely to have
some relevant experience for which they would like to receive credit under the terms of work-based learning arrangements. However, there is anecdotal evidence that professionals with work-related skills may still lack the basic academic skills to advance successfully in traditional academic disciplines.

The time-scale of the work placement provides a clear beginning and end. The production of an action plan formed against the learning outcomes of an educational scheme provides a robust framework. It involves the host organisation in a high level of commitment and working more closely with the student as well as the university. A plan which structures and focuses student activity makes the time spent in the placement more substantial and more productive for the student experience. It also offers an opportunity for feedback on performance and personal development that is concerned with the choice of professional career on leaving university.

**Conclusion**

The introduction of the CIPD qualification can be seen as the most recent attempt to provide appropriate recognition for the skills and experience developed by the work placement year. The really innovative character of the CIPD qualification is that it not only provides a qualification, but also provides a framework within which the work placement year can be given structure.

At the present time only three cohorts of students have been through the revised work placement year, but initial indications are very positive. The structure and sense of purpose, which the CIPD framework provides for the placement, appear to have been popular with both students and placement organisations. A substantial proportion of the students on the three cohorts have used their work placement to obtain the CIPD professional qualification, either at the same time as they graduate, or shortly afterwards.

Overall, the indications are that the innovation of using the work placement year of the Business Studies degree to give students an opportunity to complete their graduate CIPD qualification has been very successful. An overwhelming majority of the students have completed the work necessary to achieve the CIPD qualification, which suggests that from the students’ perspective at least the additional, nationally recognised, professionally oriented qualification has considerable value.

Employers also display a positive attitude towards the qualification, in so far as representatives of the placement organisations are concerned. Their comments and evaluations have generally been positive. However, placement organisations are not the totality of employers in any geographical or economic area and may not be a representative sample. One of the crucial questions for longer term evaluation of any programme designed to give students enhanced “employability” must be whether such programmes actually improve students’ position in the labour market. An effective evaluation of this question will require a longer time scale and larger samples than are available to date. The funding councils work in developing first destination statistics related to graduate employment may inform this matter in the future.

The preceding comments relate to the product of the course and the extrinsic value of the qualification. However, one of the most surprising aspects of the innovation, and in some ways the most hopeful, is that the use of the CIPD framework appears to have had a positive impact both on the process of the work placement year and the quality of the student experience. Students and placement organisations stressed the importance of this aspect and the comments of key witnesses within the placement organisations are particularly significant here, as they have the experience of previous years to compare with.

The objective of providing students with access to membership of CIPD has also been very successful from the students’ perspectives. However, for the scheme team it has proved complex to deal with and the additional work placed on academic staff has been significant. However, exploring different approaches provides a new dimension to the work placement year that was not available previously. The opportunities offered by this style of work placement organisation must be treated with caution as this type of development is not an end in itself, simply part of the journey. In order to gain maximum benefit from the work placement attention must be paid to the process as well as the product. Key features of the present case study can be highlighted and may serve as guidelines for good practice.
Proposed guidelines for this type of approach

The university should:
• provide tutors who are suitably trained in a portfolio approach and who possess the necessary related competence;
• support the placement student with at least two support visits and other support mechanisms as identified;
• ensure there is an opportunity for a placement feedback session at the beginning of the new academic year; and
• provide the placement organisation with the information and support it requires in order to sustain the process.

The placement organisation should:
• provide all of the developmental opportunities sought to meet the scheme requirements;
• ensure the student is able to present related documentation as evidence of notional good practice;
• engage students in work at a suitable level in order to allow them to develop the required skills in the key areas; and
• use the action plan to structure the placement activities and monitor progress.

The student should:
• play a full role in identifying and agreeing personal objectives in the development of the action plan;
• complete the requirements of the action plan in a timely manner; and
• communicate with their tutor in accordance with their individual agreements.

As this case study has indicated, a work placement experience which confirms these guidelines enriches the experience of the student and creates increased opportunities for linking academic study with skill development in practical situations.

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