

Experiential work-based learning as a social mobility mechanism for widening participation students

Rachel Roberts, Laura Brammar and Fiona Cobb

This paper evaluates the impact of an award-winning experiential work based learning programme aimed at enhancing the career development and social mobility of disadvantaged cohorts. Led by the careers team at a Russell Group Institution, the programme, financially supported by a leading graduate recruiter, involved facilitating teams of students from low-income backgrounds to conduct mini-consultancy projects with local businesses. Students were also provided with wrap-around support from careers staff. 83% of surveyed participants agreed the programme made a difference to the types of jobs or placements they would apply for in future and increases in employability-related self-efficacy scores were identified.



Introduction

Experiential Work-based learning (WBL), in its many forms (Tully and Avramenko 2015) can provide experiences which enhance employability skills for graduates (Mason et al. 2009; Lowden et al. 2011). Offering opportunities for work-based learning can be a key way for employers to provide greater employment opportunities to less advantaged students and graduates (Pennington et al 2013). Evidence suggests experiential WBL, (e.g. placements) can enable students to test their career ideas (Wilton 2012; Little and Harvey 2006), thereby improving and increasing their employability (Yorke and Knight 2006). Jackson (2016) suggests that graduate employability should 'encompass the construction of pre-professional

identity (PPI) during university years' (Jackson 2016: 2). This emphasises the role of HE as providing a 'landscape of practice' (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015: 15), incorporating a varied mix of interacting and relevant communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991), from academics to careers services, from student societies to employers, which all provide a context for the student's learning. Supported WBL can enable students to begin to construct their pre-professional identity and enhance their employability.

Conceptually experiential WBL is underpinned by the work of Dewey (1916, 1933, 1938), Kolb (1984), Schön (1983, 1987) and more recently Lester and Costley (2010). Aspects of the action learning model (Revans 1980), such as learners gaining insights through real world issue discussion are relevant to WBL. The constructivist concept of the independent learner making sense of her or his context and role (Tennant 2004) is also highly relevant to WBL. WBL also links to the notion of regarding one's experience as a prime careers learning opportunity (Mitchell and Krumboltz 1996). There is evidence that students recognise the potential of WBL as a way to enhance their CV or resume (Bachman and Eliason 2012; Curiale 2010; Feeley 2007; Lancaster and Baker 2010). Cruz (2010) also found that students often regard work placements as a prime way of solving the 'no experience, no job' conundrum.

WBL can be transformative for the participants. Mezirow (1997) argues that transformative learning can effect 'change in a frame of reference' (Mezirow 1997: 5). Providing a student with a first-hand insight into an unfamiliar professional landscape can change the way they approach their future employability.

WBL can also have a wider transformative impact on the host workplace itself. If we consider workplaces as 'complex interpersonal environments' (Eraut and Hirsch 2010: 35), the presence of WBL can emphasise learning in a wider context across the organisation.

For many years UK Governments have argued that universities have a social mobility function which exceeds their role as providers of quality higher education. In 2012 the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission described universities as 'the gatekeepers of opportunity and the main pathway into careers in the professions' (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission 2012: 12).

The capacity for universities to encourage social mobility is significant as the UK has been persistently poor at producing intergenerational income mobility (Ermish et al. 2012). Crawford and Erve (2015) found that high paying and high status roles are still dominated by the more advantaged cohorts within society. Other research (Macmillan et al. 2013), found that privately educated graduates are a third more likely to enter into high-status occupations than state educated graduates, predominantly due to differences in educational attainment and university selection.

Crawford and Erve argue that in order for HE to 'truly level the playing field' (Crawford and Erve, 2015: 410) more policymaker attention needs to be focused on the employment destinations of graduates from different socio-economic backgrounds. A large study led by the Institute of Fiscal Studies (2016), which used anonymised student loan records and tax data for 260,000 students up to ten years after their graduation, found that graduates from richer family backgrounds earn significantly more after graduation than their poorer counterparts, even after graduating with the same degrees from the same universities.

The role of our social capital (Bourdieu 1977) in shaping our future career paths has been well documented. Recent Future Track studies (Purcell et al. 2012) have identified the persistent role and value of social capital within the graduate labour market, above and beyond the possession of a degree. The role of networks has been identified as a prime way to access both valuable work experience opportunities (Francis and Sommerlad 2009) and high status occupations

(Coleman 1990). This is particularly pertinent in the context of high salary roles, where recruiting businesses seek high quality information on the likely performance of any suitable applicants (Marsden and Gorman 2001).

Balta et al. (2012) identify a range of barriers that less advantaged students perceive in terms of pursuing a long term placement, such as feeling that they could not afford to delay entering the graduate labour market. Short term placements or internships are often unpaid which leaves many financially disadvantaged students unable to pursue such opportunities (Curiale 2010). This has longer term implications on their graduate employability due to a lack of relevant experience and social capital.

With 26.5% of graduate positions filled by people who had previously worked for the same employer (e.g. placements or internships) (AGR 2015), the accessibility of work experience opportunities from a social mobility perspective is pertinent. As many internships are unpaid, this significantly limits their accessibility to more advantaged students, who are already in positions of greater social, cultural and financial capital than their more disadvantaged peers (Macmillan, Tyler and Vignoles 2013; Macmillan and Vignoles, 2013). This emphasises the need for additional WBL opportunities to be supported and enhanced by the careers services within universities.

Evidence suggests that less advantaged students do not traditionally use their careers services, instead choosing to refer to their own, often limited, informal contacts (Greenback 2011; Simpson 2013). Christie (2015) argues that HE careers professionals are aware of the 'structural constraints' (Christie 2015: 12) in which their clients operate. For these reasons proactive delivery of careers and employability education, such as through the curriculum, is increasingly prioritised over the students' voluntary use of careers services on campus. Piazza (2011) identifies support from the careers service as a means of developing the student's strategic career planning, which will benefit their lifelong learning.

It is within this context that a Russell Group Higher Education Institution based in London established a new employability initiative targeted at their less

advantaged students. This institution has a significant widening participation student population with 42% of UK Undergraduate students in academic year 2014/15 in receipt of a university bursary. Data from the Destination of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE) survey showed that six months following graduation, bursary holders were 14% more likely to be unemployed and 30% more likely to be in non-graduate jobs than their more privileged counterparts.

To address this the university partnered with a leading graduate recruiter from the financial sector who invested in the development and piloting of a specific WBL initiative. This targeted initiative offered bursary holding students the opportunity and support to conduct paid mini-consultancy projects within local growth sector businesses. This initiative combined employer partnerships, student work experience and wrap-around careers support. The local businesses worked with careers staff to devise bespoke briefs for actual mini consultancy projects which would genuinely enhance the work of the business.

The consultancy projects ran for five weeks during term time, with students working in teams of five, each spending four hours per week on the project. Students were paid the London Living Wage and the hours were flexible to accommodate other study, work or home responsibilities. All bursary holders received a targeted recruitment email to maximise applications from this cohort and written applications were shortlisted based on evidence of any transferable skills, rather than previous experience. Any strong applications made by bursary holders were prioritised and candidates were invited to an assessment centre. The successful applicants were then allocated to cross-discipline and cross-graduation year teams, which also included a blend of complementing skills-sets and personalities.

The participants attended a range of skills sessions with a Careers Consultant where they received project management, consultancy and professional communication training. These sessions were delivered across the lifespan of the project and included a pre-project induction, a midway check-in session and a final skills debrief. Each individual participant also had the opportunity to have a 1:1 session with a Careers Consultant. Additionally, support was provided by the employers involved in the programme. Each team was

allocated a mentor from the corporate partner's staff, who met with the students to offer advice and insight. The teams were also allocated a key contact within the local businesses and at the end of the project the teams presented their findings to both the local businesses at their premises and at the corporate partner's premises.

Between June 2015 and March 2016, 80 students were recruited to the programme and 78 completed it. These students worked on sixteen discrete projects for fifteen different local businesses (eight start-up businesses, six SMEs and one large business). All of the businesses were in growth sectors, predominantly based in East London and 13 of the 15 businesses had not partnered with the university prior to this project.

Methodology

We posed two research questions:

1. Did engagement in the experiential work based learning scheme produce positive social mobility outcomes for less advantaged graduates in terms of their work experience?

2. Did engagement in the wrap-around support of the scheme produce positive learning outcomes in terms of career development?

Qualitative and quantitative data were collected through surveys to measure any changes in the students' employability skills and the numbers of students engaged in meaningful next step employment (e.g. graduate job, student internship, post-graduate study). In-depth semi-structured interviews were held with 15 participants who had completed the programme.

Student record data was used to identify what percentage of students within the institution could be described as from a less advantaged background. Furthermore, national survey data such as the DLHE survey was also used to ascertain the graduate destinations (e.g. graduate level employment) of distinct cohorts.

This analysis showed that 42% of home country Undergraduate students in academic year 2014/15 were in receipt of a bursary from the university.

Table 1. Undergraduate students in receipt of a Bursary 2014/15

Bursary holders' distribution	%
Full bursary holders (household incomes under 25,000)	80%
Part bursary holders (household incomes between £25,001 - £42,600)	20%
Bursary population	4547

The WBL programme was launched in March 2015 with the objectives to evaluate the impact of this intervention with regard to producing social mobility outcomes for less advantaged graduates. The impact measurements used included any changes in the students' employability skills and the numbers of students in meaningful next step employment (e.g. graduate job, internship, post-graduate study).

Students were surveyed four times during the programme yielding the following response rates:

Table 2. Survey response rates of programme participants

Survey point	Respondents	Response Rate
Immediately pre-project	78	100%
Immediately post-project	73	96%
3 months post project	48	89%
6 months post project	27	82%

Additionally, 40 minute reflective in-depth interviews were held with 15 of the students who completed the programme.

Findings

Changes in employability-related self-efficacy through WBL

Directly before and after their placements, students were asked to rate their confidence in nine employability skills areas identified by the careers team of the institution as important for graduate employability. Students rated their confidence on a scale of one to five – one being not at all confident and five being very confident. Table three shows the average self-ratings of the students participating in the programme for each employability skill area both before and after completing the programme, and the change in student's average self-efficacy ratings in each of the skills areas.

Employability skill	Mean score pre placement skills rating	Mean score post placement skills rating	Difference between mean skills ratings pre and post placement	t-Stat	p=0.05
Conducting research	3.21	3.74	0.53	3.80	0.01*
Communicating with professionals	3.52	3.95	0.42	3.58	0.01*
Coming up with new ideas	3.4	3.76	0.37	2.41	0.02*
Presenting to an audience	3.52	3.9	0.38	2.64	0.01*
Working in a team	3.73	4.28	0.55	4.64	1.56
Confidence in a career context	3.61	4.06	0.44	3.39	0.01*
Thinking logically	3.69	4.01	0.32	3.38	0.01*
Creating solutions to problems	3.62	3.89	0.27	1.67	0.10
Knowing what's expected of me in a professional work setting	2.69	4.24	1.55	11.67	4.38

*=significant at 0.05 level (alpha 0.05)

Table 3. Average student employability skills self-efficacy ratings pre and post placement

Paired-samples t-tests were conducted to compare average self-efficacy of employability skills scores of participants before and after participating in the WBL programme. Overall there was a positive change in mean student self-efficacy in all nine employability skills categories, with the biggest increase in 'knowing what's expected of me in a professional setting' ($t=11.67$), however, this was not significant at the 95% confidence level, so we cannot be sure that the difference was not due to chance, and further investigation with a larger sample would be useful to substantiate this.

During the final skills debrief session, careers staff showed the participants their own initial self-assessment skills rankings (completed before the project) and compared these to their post project self-assessment skills rankings. Students were often surprised by the fact that they had sometimes ranked themselves *lower* in skillsets post project despite the fact that they thought that they had developed and improved in these areas. For example: *"I thought I knew what team work was; now I actually know."* These insights illustrate the transformative potential of WBL (Mezirow 1997) as a way to reassess oneself against different working environments.

Evidence of positive learning outcomes

Post placement interviews were conducted with 15 students. Analysis of these interviews identified five recurrent themes which reflect positive learning outcomes for the students, relating to social capital (Bourdieu, 1977). These themes were: confidence in a careers context; increasing professional networks; differences in employability; communicating with professionals and expectations of a professional setting. The following five extracts respectively illustrate these themes:

- i. 'It has definitely increased my [career thinking] confidence; I always thought 'I'm not good enough' or 'I'm not equal to others'. Now, having done this project and got so much good feedback, I think 'maybe I can do that too!' I feel confident and entitled to go for other things which I wouldn't have before.'
- ii. 'Met another mentor at the presentation – this experience taught me that it's about

stripping down the barriers, it's not about where you come from its more about the effort you put in.'

- iii. 'I now have now secured a Graduate Role as a Tax analyst at one of the Big 4 firms. I had to do a presentation as part of my final interview, having worked with my client (micro business) and also [leading financial institution], and gaining a mixture of both presenting formally and informally helped me. I think it enhanced my confidence.'
- iv. 'I learnt to maintain and act in a professional manner – I learnt to always be honest and never to over exaggerate what the team could and could not do.'
- v. 'I can talk about a real life experience where I have actually dealt with a real client... If I am applying to internships I have actually done something real. [The programme] has formed a significant part of my CV... Consultancy has now become a real career option for me.'

Evidence of impact on social mobility and engagement with employability

34 out of 48 student respondents in the three month follow up survey confirmed their experience on the programme had made a difference to the types of jobs or placements they have been applying to or to their professional networks. 47 out of 48 students felt the programme would have a lasting impact on their employability, in terms of improving their CV, affirming their skills and providing examples of competencies for future applications. 10 out of 48 of the respondents had engaged further with the HEI's Careers services within three months of completing their placement. The six month follow up survey yielded 27 responses including 22 respondents who also completed the three months post placement questionnaire. 18 out of 27 students had used examples from their programme experience on applications and in interviews. 9 respondents had not used examples, but planned to in the future.

Discussion

Our results, both qualitative and quantitative indicate that there is evidence of positive social mobility outcomes for less advantaged students who participated in the programme in terms of specific employability elements. It is clear from our findings that the less advantaged students who participated in the scheme were able to identify specific ways through which the scheme had enhanced their employability. These ways included improved professional development skills, such as networking, to the generation of strong examples of transferable skills and competencies which will be significant for their future recruitment. This translation from vague and generic claims about one's employability, to specific evidence of particular skillsets is articulated by one participant:

'I think my employability increased because when you write a CV you tend to make claims about yourself, like "I am an ambitious individual" but now I can really back that up.'

The positive social mobility outcomes which we found were not only significant by their breadth but also by their depth. Following completion of the programme, 18 out of 27 students in the six months follow up survey reported continuing some form of employability activity, (such as internships, further study, volunteering, working or additional engagement with the university careers service) following completion of the programme. This implies that there are longitudinal benefits of such a WBL scheme, with participants identifying a sustainable impact on their ongoing employability and career development:

'Looking back on it I think having not done [the programme] I would have been less ambitious with my careers prospects.'

'It's all about powering through potential self-limiting beliefs, learning as much as you can and growing as both person and a professional.'

Limitations of the study

Our results are based on one WBL scheme with a small cohort within one institution. To draw stronger conclusions we would need to significantly expand

the cohort either within the institutions or with similar widening participation cohorts within different institutions.

The lack of longer term evaluation data from the participants involved in the initiative has limited the conclusions we can draw about the positive impact on the student participants' long term employability and career development.

Conclusions

We conclude that such experiential WBL schemes with wrap-around support can have a significant impact on the career development and social mobility of university students from widening participation backgrounds. This WBL scheme (Yorke and Knight 2006) clearly cultivated a productive relationship between the careers service on campus and less advantaged students, who typically engage with university careers provision, less than their more advantaged peers (Greenback 2011; Simpson 2013).

The targeted and wrap-around support from careers professionals enabled participants to identify how they had developed specific skills during their placement, which has implications for their long term career management (Wilton 2012; Little and Harvey 2006). This illustrates how such schemes can be used strategically by HE careers services as an innovative way to engage traditional non-user cohorts.

In light of the social mobility objectives of the proposed Higher Education and Research Bill (2016), this project can be seen as one way that institutions can address the social capital needs of their disadvantaged students. This study also exposes the level of effort, including resourcing, required by institutions to fulfil their responsibilities to those students. The significance of this effort is underscored by graduate employability metrics such as the DLHE survey and its future iterations and the Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO) data. Such datasets will continue to affect an institution's position within sector wide league tables, which use such data in their criteria. More research needs to be done to assess the longer term impact of such experiential WBL from the perspective of the employability of less advantaged students.

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For correspondence

Rachel Roberts,
The Careers Group, University of London

Rae.Roberts@rhul.ac.uk