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An Investigation of Work Placement in the Hotel Industry: Perceptions from Hoteliers and Students

Dr Margaret Linehan and Dr Irene Sheridan

Abstract

The changing need of higher education to interface more effectively with industry has been widely documented, as has the rising awareness of those attributes which most benefit graduates seeking employment. A key way in which third-level institutions can build stronger partnerships with employers, and assist their students in postgraduate success, is through the provision of work placements.

This paper presents research conducted in relation to work placement in the hotel industry, from the perspective of both hoteliers who facilitated the work placements and students who undertook placements. Primary research was conducted with both hoteliers and students.

The findings from the paper illustrate that placement is an important component of third-level programmes and is one of the most vital experiences on which graduates base their career aspirations. There is an onus, therefore, on higher education institutions and employers to ensure that the placement experience is as rewarding as possible for students. Placement provides opportunities for higher education institutions and employers to work together to produce graduates with appropriate knowledge, skills and competence to meet existing and emerging business needs. Work placements also provide opportunities for students to develop soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, and multi-tasking skills, which are essential in learning and work situations as well as part of general life skills for employees.

Key Words: Work placement, hotels, students, hoteliers.

Introduction

Work placements are not a new type of activity or a new trend in education. From the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, John Dewey, an educational reformer, believed that life and learning should be firmly integrated. Work placement programmes, therefore, have been long associated with various types of apprenticeships and higher education contexts throughout the USA, Canada, and various European countries. Work placements have been defined in a number of ways, some more expansive than others. All definitions, however, include the key notion that work placements involve ‘gaining experience on the job’ and are now a recognised part of many third-level programmes. Coco (2000) suggested that work placements are a “planned transition from the classroom to the job, and are a natural bridge between college and the work world”.

For the purpose of this paper, work placement is taken to mean a work context for intentional learning that is relevant to the aims and intended learning outcomes of a higher education programme or module. Work can mean paid or unpaid employment.

Work Placement and Employability Skills

The changing need of higher education to interface more effectively with industry has been widely documented, as has the rising awareness of those attributes which most benefit graduates seeking employment. A key way in which third-level institutions can build stronger partnerships with employers, and assist their students in postgraduate success, is through the provision of work placements. Employability is becoming a key benchmark for career success (Carbery and Garavan, 2005). Employability is generally regarded as a set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and to be successful in their chosen occupations. Research by Herbert and Rothwell (2005) confirms a shift towards employability skills being increasingly important in the recruitment and selection of graduate employees. Their research highlighted the value of work-integrated learning, especially work-based placements, involving academic institutions and business organisations.

For some higher education institutions, the workplace is seen more favourably as a legitimate site for contextualised learning that can bridge the gap between theory and practice and promote the development of desirable core graduate attributes. Students can engage in real work practices in a work environment, learn how to communicate with colleagues, and deal with work related problems. Learning becomes less theory based and more practical and contextual. Workplace learning programmes are, therefore, designed to capitalise on the inherent link between theory and its place in professional practice.

What do People Learn at Work?

Knowledge creation and the deployment of new knowledge in the workplace have given rise to the workplace itself being recognised as a site of learning and knowledge production. This concept is an integral feature of the 'knowledge economy'. Brennan (2005) suggests that, if higher education is to continue to make a contribution to the knowledge economy, collaborative activities based in and around the workplace must be included.

There has been a considerable shift in the way individual learning and development is understood and characterised. There has also been a move from identifying training needs to identifying learning needs, suggesting that development is owned by the student with the need, rather than by the trainer seeking to satisfy that need (Nikolou-Walker, 2008). In other words, learning is demand led rather than provider driven. This has implications for whoever identifies the needs and the way that those needs are met. Current thinking suggests that needs are best developed by a partnership between the individual and the organisation, and that the methods of meeting these needs are not limited to formal courses, but also depend on a wide range of on-the-job development methods and distance or e-learning approaches. Recent studies have summarised that people learn at work as follows:

- By doing the job itself;
- Through cooperating and interacting with colleagues;
- Through working with clients;
- By tackling challenging and new tasks;
- By reflecting on and evaluating one's work experiences;

- Through formal education;
- Through extra-work contexts;

(Heikkilä, 2006; Tikkamäki, 2006; Billett *et al.*, 2005; Collin and Vallela, 2005).

Importantly, the articulation of clear learning outcomes is considered to be a central feature of any type of learning. A statement of learning outcomes associated with the placement provides students with an understanding of what is trying to be accomplished.

Work Placements and Learning

There is widespread consensus in the work placement literature that just knowing applicable theory is not enough: students must know when and how the theory is to be applied. It is further suggested that when more self-directed learning becomes possible outside of the classroom, students are encouraged to find creative responses to situations, rather than relying on the stereotypic or patterned responses that classroom role-plays and simulations often generate (Regehr *et al.*, 2002).

Extensive research by Eraut (2007) on how individuals learn at work, particularly in the early stages of their careers, concluded that not only do people learn in different ways, but they also learn different things. Eraut suggested that placements provide contexts for learning of a very different kind from those provided within third-level institutions, but he warned that, unlike in teaching organisations, learning is not the main aim of most workplaces. He observed that in most workplaces learning is informal and occurs as a by-product of engaging in work processes and activities. Newcomers often have to learn ‘how we do things here’ without being given any specific objectives or advice.

Learning about and within the workplace as an institution, including its politics and its potential points of breakdown, is not simply an aspect of work that needs to be learnt to ‘do the job’, but also a context for developing new understandings and approaches to learning and to life itself.

Empirical research conducted by Cheatham and Chivers (2001) attest to the wide variety of ways in which individuals acquire competence. They suggest that much of the learning required to attain full professional competence actually takes place after the completion of formal education. They go further by adding that, beyond initial qualification, usually via a combination of formal education and structured training, most professionals evidently progress their professional learning via informal and incidental learning, with little if any emphasis on formally organised learning. This, they conclude, highlights the critical importance of informal learning.

Theorists such as Kolb (1984) acknowledged the value of learning outside the classroom, where there are new challenges to practice and to reflect on their outcomes. Kolb also highlighted the socio-cultural context of learning and emphasised the roles of colleagues and workplace mentors in student learning in work placements. Kolb also believes that reflection is an essential element of learning. The practice of reflection has also been highlighted by Fink (1999) who terms reflection as “dialogue with self” in his model of active learning. This is seen as an essential skill that all students need to acquire if they are to become active learners.

Work placements provide positive opportunities for learning in this manner, as one of the main aims of all work placements is to promote reasoning, analytical, and evaluative abilities in students through reflective practice. Students will develop reflective abilities during the course of their learning on placement. Boud and Middleton (2003) also believe that reflective practice is an important feature in work placements as it features the individual and his or her experiences, leading to a new conceptual perspective or understanding. Similarly, research conducted by Blackwell et al. (2001) added that work experience itself is not necessarily intrinsically beneficial, but, it is the learning that an individual derives from the experience that is important. They further observed that reflection is an essential complement to learning at work. Little (2006) concurs on the importance of reflection and suggests that if learning opportunities are to be maximised in 'non-traditional' forms of work experience, then students need some kind of structure and support in order that they reflect upon and articulate the learning. Little summarised that it is generally recognised that if the learning from work experience is planned and intentional from the outset it is easier for students to reflect on it and to identify what has been learned.

Methodology

The research conducted for this paper consisted of both focus groups and face-to-face in-depth interviews. Two focus groups were conducted with current students who have completed placement in various hotels in Ireland and in the United States. The students are currently in Year 2 and Year 4 of the Bachelor of Business in Hospitality Management. The focus groups were conducted in December 2013. A focus group interview guide was developed to systematically gather wide-ranging information on different aspects of work placements. The focus group interview guide included topics which the focus group facilitator was free to explore, to probe deeper, and to ask broader questions in relation to the topic under investigation. The most fundamental use of the focus group interview guide was to provide a basic checklist during the interviews, so that different groups might address all relevant aspects of work placement. The guide also helped the focus group facilitator to carefully decide on how best to use the limited time available in the interview situation, as well as making the interviewing of different people more systematic and comprehensive.

Additionally, six in-depth interviews were conducted with hotel managers who have been providing placement opportunities for hospitality management students for a number of years. An interview guide was also used for these interviews. The managers chosen for inclusion in this study were contacted via email contacts provided from placement coordinators for the Bachelor of Business in Hospitality Management. All managers contacted readily agreed to take part in the research.

General Impressions of Work Placement

At the opening stage of the focus groups all students were invited to give a brief overview of their broad impressions of their work placements. This question elicited a general sense of their overall experiences as students on placement. All students gave very positive impressions of work placements:

Placement was very good. It was a very positive experience and we also got paid. It was good to get three months placement after the first year as it was totally different from our learning in college.

Our placement showed us real life experiences and dealing with guests which we could not have done in college.

The students believed that the 'real world' experiences they gained while on placement could be used to apply theoretical aspects of their course in their future examinations. They further believed that the experience they built up in the workplace should make the transition from college to work easier for them. Students also suggested that having job experience on their CVs would be looked on more favourably by future employers in comparison to having completed only a college-based project.

The majority of students were satisfied with the responsibilities they were given while on placement:

We were given real jobs. There were no menial tasks and we felt that we were thrown in the deep end.

Shadowing the manager worked well as we were given an idea of how the whole hotel worked and we were able to see what type of responsibilities rested on the manager.

There is a big difference between first year placement and third year placement. When we did our third year placement we were given much more responsibilities and we were taken more seriously.

The hotel managers were also asked to summarise their general impressions of placement and they also supported the view that placement offers a valuable learning opportunity in an undergraduate programme and they were very aware of the role that they played in facilitating that learning.

I come from a hospitality management programme myself so I am very supportive of the whole placement side of things. The students are very enthusiastic, young, and ambitious. They bring good energy and they have some good ideas. They have a lot to learn as well which is what we are here for. I really enjoy the enthusiasm and ambition side of things too.

Placements are great, I love them. I am a product of work placement myself. I hope they learn a very true reflection of what the job is like. We don't wrap them in cotton wool; we put them right into it. We train them first in our ways and teach them about regulations etc., and then we link them with our staff. We then get an idea of what they want and what we can give.

I like placement, we are a local business and we give placement opportunities to the local schools and colleges. We need their support also, because they will often come back with communions and confirmations etc. The next food and beverage manager could be the young student who came in on placement, so we need to be supportive.

All of the hotel managers reported that they benefited from new skills and energy brought to the workplace by students but they cautioned that this benefit accrues only where the placement is of sufficient duration.

Preparation for Work Placement

Students were asked to share their views on what support they received to prepare them for their work placements:

We were always guided by our placement supervisor before we went on placement and during placement too. If there was a problem we knew who to contact.

I think it would be good if we could have an increase in practical classes before we go on placement, as there is only so much we can learn from a book. If there were role type situations with difficult customers or different scenarios it would help us.

Students also believed that an increased emphasis on developing softer skills, such as communication would have benefitted them before they arrived in the work place.

The hotel managers were also asked to share their opinions regarding the readiness of the students for the workplace:

They are very enthusiastic, young, and ambitious and they bring good energy to the hotel. They also have some good ideas, they seem well prepared, but they have a lot to learn as well. I just love the whole ambition and enthusiasm side of things.

I feel I get a lot of support from the college while the students are on placement. Their placement lecturer contacts me regularly by email and phone while they are in the hotel. They all seem very prepared before they come, one student who came in for placement in the bar is now the bar supervisor. I am really very positive about the overall placement experience.

I never had an issue with any of the lecturers or their support. I would like to work closer with the college to support the students while they are on placement.

All of the managers interviewed suggested that they would like further engagement with third level colleges before, during, and after the placement. The managers believed that placement facilitated the original link with the colleges they would like to develop more opportunities for interaction.

Duration of the Placement

The hotel managers interviewed expressed the view that placements should be longer – more than six months – for all parties to significantly benefit:

Longer is always better, six months and upwards. At three months we are just about getting the value from the employer side and the student side also.

The first three months is settling in time and then it starts to accelerate between three and six months. It takes time to get to grip with placement and hotels are hard work.

The placement could be longer than three months. The first month they are just finding their feet and they just have eight weeks after that. I believe that if we had them for longer I would be able to move them to different areas of the hotel and they would learn more. If I had them for six months it would be beneficial. Six months would be an ideal block and I would plan rotation into that six months.

The students were also asked for their views in relation to the length of placements:

In our first year we had a three month placement. I think this was really important for us and we should always have an opportunity to go on placement early on. We are now in fourth year and I think that placement should be longer. I would suggest possibly a year, as a year would allow us more experience in more areas within the industry.

I think it would be good if all hospitality students could be put into industry one day a week while we are in college. It would give us a taste of the industry early on and more experience of working in a real restaurant or hotel.

The length of placement is quite substantial, but placement needs to be paid because sometimes we have to move away from home and have to pay for travel and accommodation. Luckily, all of our placements are paid.

Some managers avail of added value from placements by offering extra part-time work or summer work to students on placement, allowing them to recoup more of their investment in the training and development of students.

Benefits of Placement

Students were invited to share their insights on their placement experiences, and to highlight their likes and dislikes of their time spent in the workplace. The majority of students suggested that their placements were very positive experiences, and in many cases exceeded their expectations:

Some of us went to the USA on work placements and we really liked working with different cultures. Our placements were on a much bigger scale, for example, one hotel had 500 bedrooms. It would be great if we could have more options to go on international placements.

We learned a lot from dealing with the guests which we could not have learnt in college. During placement we learned to be independent and particularly for those of us who went abroad for our placement.

Our overall skills, such as operational skills were greatly improved. We also got to see what the job is really like. We also learned a lot when we got to shadow different managers.

Many of the focus group participants entered the workplace with rather low expectations of their tasks and perceived that they may be given “made up” jobs, however, the majority of students reported that they were “surprised” at how seriously they were taken in the workplace.

The hotel managers were also invited to share their perceptions of the benefits of work placements both to the students and the hotels:

In college they can be taught about the job, but they have to experience the job for themselves. We can teach them on the job learning and also about the culture of the hotel. In the classroom, you cannot get across the reality of a situation, they have to experience that.

They gain confidence in what they are doing. They see different management styles and gain management experience also. They also see how the whole operation runs and there is a lot of learning involved when they go to various departments in the hotel.

The students definitely learn the practical side of the work and some of them decide that hotel work is not for them. They learn how to deal with real people when they face customers and they grow up very fast.

Students were invited to share the aspects of placement which they particularly disliked:

I didn't like the split shifts. It can be a very long day if we have a few hours off during the day and then have to start working again in the evening. At the start of the placement in particular this was difficult, but I guess this is the type of industry we will be going into.

In college we could be working very hard, but we were not on split shifts. I didn't like the unsocial hours of the work.

The students also suggested that placement gave them the opportunity to evaluate their skill levels and abilities, and importantly for them, to recognise in time that they may not be interested in working in the same employment over the long term.

Improving the Work Experience

Students and hotel managers were asked for their suggestions on improving work experience. The sentiments of the students were quite similar and can be summarised as:

I think we should be given more options for us to go abroad. It would be good to go on international placements such as America and Canada. Dubai was also mentioned as an option and that would be a great opportunity for us. Europe could be a barrier for us as we would not be fluent in the language of the country.

It would be good if there was more of a focus on management training before we go out on placement, and this would be particularly important for third year placements.

Travel subsidies should be allowed for students who have to travel long distances from their homes. It would be good too if our lecturers helped us find accommodation as finding accommodation can create a lot of pressure for us.

The students generally were very positive about their experiences in the work places, they believed that the work experience of future students could be greatly enhanced through ensuring that all placements are paid and that additional support could be provided in sourcing accommodation.

The hotel managers were also asked for suggestions on improving the work experience:

I would like to be involved in the selection of students for work placement. I would like the opportunity to sit on the selection panel and get to choose students who fit our culture. I would like to select students who really want to be in our hotel and not just because they have to do work placement.

I would like the opportunity to go into the classrooms in college and hopefully encourage more students into the career. I am really looking for chefs at the moment and am finding

the recruitment process really difficult. It is tough recruiting the right people because of unsocial hours etc. A lot of young students are saying that they do not want to work on Friday or Saturday nights.

I want students to come here to our hotel and I want to make it hard for them to get the opportunity to do their placement with us. I want to make this hotel a desirable location and I wouldn't say we are harsh but realistic.

Conclusions

Third-level education plays a significant role in fostering the transfer of employability skills to students. Increasingly, this is achieved through developing a tripartite link between students, employers, and higher education providers. Graduates are now expected to be able to perform efficiently on the job almost as soon as they take up employment, utilising the many skills gained while in third-level education. There is an onus, therefore, on higher education institutions to prepare students for placement and to ensure that the placement is as rewarding as possible for students. Placement provides opportunities for higher education institutions and employers to work together to produce graduates with appropriate knowledge, skills, and competence to meet existing and emerging business needs.

Employers tend to have more positive views of graduates who have undertaken work placements during their undergraduate course. These graduates are generally perceived to have acquired more employability skills for success at work. Building and sustaining longer-term and closer relationships between higher education institutions and employers is, therefore, an integral part of successful placements.

The legitimacy of the workplace as a source of learning is increasingly recognised by higher education institutions. Developing higher level skills is no longer restricted to learning gained within the mainstream higher education environment. The demand for higher level skills in the knowledge economy should motivate educators and employers to work together to ensure graduates are 'work ready' for an upturn in the economy.

For students, a course which provides work placement provides them with opportunities to gain insights into the hotel industry, and also allows them to observe how theory gained on their course translates to practice. Students supplement their learning with practical experience through informal and non-formal learning as well as building up generic transferrable skills. Thus, work placement plays an important role in helping students to ground their theoretical studies by aligning them with their work placement experience. Personal development is also an important element of the placement experience, as students articulated a sense of increased confidence in their communication, time management, and team-working skills. As classroom challenges are not subject to the same time urgency that is an integral part of work life, placements help to prepare students for this important career element. General experience gained in the workplace is difficult to replicate effectively outside the workplace, therefore, work placements add significantly to the value of third-level qualifications. Higher education courses that include work placements contribute in a considerable way to enhancing student skills, thus giving competitive advantage to the Irish workforce.

Finally, the emphasis on the smart economy requires that third-level education will continually interact with and respond to the needs of industry, and in so doing will continue to be informed

by workplace requirements in order to produce graduates who are optimally employment ready. Ensuring that graduates from third-level institutions successfully transfer into the workplace is central to Ireland regaining its competitive advantage.

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