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Workplaces and Policy Spaces: insights from Third Sector Internships Scotland

Abstract

Understanding the relationship between learning and work is a key concern for educational researchers and policy makers at the local, national and international level. The way that learning and the economic environment are framed impacts upon policy and funding decisions and has significant implications for the HE sector. This paper explores how internships have become a key site in which policy and funding mechanisms seek to address concerns about graduate employability and graduate skills in relation to Scottish national economic plans and perceived business needs.

Drawing from five years data generated from the Third Sector Internships Scotland programme we adopt an approach to our analysis of policy and internship experiences based on a spatial perspective. We explore two spatial arenas in play; the conceptual space where discussion and policy making occur and the physical places of education and the workplace where learning takes place. We trace shifts in the policy and funding of higher education internship and work placement schemes and consider how these shifts respond to internship experiences of the workplace.

We argue that changes within the conceptual and physical spaces intersect and that identifying contrasts and overlaps helps us to focus on particular questions about how internships develop learning for students.

Taking the national approach within Scotland as a bounded case offers a unique opportunity to explore the ways in which internships have played an increasingly significant place as a pedagogic device operating at the borderlands between educational organisations and the physical spaces of employment.

Introduction

Understanding the relationship between learning and work is a key concern for educational researchers and policy makers at the local, national and international level. The way that assumptions about both learning and the economic environment are framed in such discussions shapes policy and funding decisions and has significant implications for the HE sector. Workplaces, and the pedagogy of workplace learning, have become key arenas within which strategy, policy and funding mechanisms seek to address concerns about graduate employability and graduate skills in relation to national economic plans and perceived business needs.

In this paper we take the national approach within Scotland as a bounded case to illustrate the way in which work placements, and more recently, internships, have played an increasingly significant place as a pedagogic device [1] operating at the borderlands between the spaces for education organisations and the spaces for employment. In this intersecting space the tensions between the immediate requirements of employers and the longer term interests of policy makers became

apparent, indicating that HEIs have a role to play in supporting broader notions of teaching and learning in these discussions.

Debates about graduate employability are often placed within the context of a global 'knowledge' economy and the potential impact on local and national labour market environments (Browne 2010; CBI 2009; UKCES 2010, 2008). Wilson (2012) describes the central role of universities in the provision of a 'supply chain' of graduates with high level skills alongside world class research within a landscape of business-university collaboration. This type of policy approach has been subject to a critique that it adopts a simplistic and uncritical understanding of the global knowledge economy and is overoptimistic about potential future graduate opportunities (Lauder et al. 2012; Brown et al. 2008). Nevertheless graduate employability and national economic growth remain a core interest for Scottish policy makers, researchers and higher education institutions as it is argued that the interests of both students and employers intersect in an era of increased costs and reductions in public spending. Experience of, and in, the workplace has been clearly established as a key factor that enhances employability for individual students (BIS 2013) and in this paper we situate the discussion in the context of university support for work placements and internships.

We argue that the Scottish context offers us a unique opportunity to identify particular aspects of learning from the employers and students participating in the 5 years of the Third Sector Internships Scotland (TSIS) programme as the national policy space changed shape. Insights from this particular arena have clear resonance for enhancing our broader understanding of the interface between university pedagogic priorities, employer needs and policy drivers. TSIS was a Scottish Funding Council programme which developed internships in voluntary organisations, charities and social enterprises in order to (i) offer work experience and skills development opportunities for students, (ii) promote the third sector as a graduate career option, and (iii) enable students to make a valuable contribution to the work of Scotland's Third Sector. In doing so it hoped to contribute to the development of work-based learning opportunities and enhance the employability of Scotland's university students. It was run and managed by a consortium of universities and third sector partners, led by Queen Margaret University, The Open University in Scotland, and the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations. It has dealt with over 8,300 applications, conducted and given feedback from 1275 interviews and provided 349 internships. 94% of the internships were provided by Small and Medium Sized employers [2]. The TSIS programme included an ongoing research strand and more detailed information about the project methodology for gathering source information, the data and analysis of the project findings can be found in the research reports (Caddell, 2012, Caddell and Jones, 2013) and at www.3rdsectorintern.com.

In this paper we take a step back from the detailed project-specific data and explore the changing dialogue from policy makers and employers over the timeframe of the programme and draw out the ways in which notions of work-based learning are understood. We adopted an approach to our analysis based on a spatial perspective, following Brookes et al. (2012). We consider that, although there are many possible conceptualisations of space, there are two particular spatial arenas in play; the conceptual space where discussion and policy making occur and the physical places of education and the workplace where learning takes place. Traversing these two contrasting spaces are notions of pedagogy and learning; enacted and understood in multiple ways by students, employers, HEIs and policy makers. Using our own history, TSIS project data and public policy documents we were able to analyse and reflect on the ways in which these conceptual and physical spaces were

described over time. We were able to consider commonalities and contrasts in the way that work-based learning was understood from a number of perspectives, in themselves subject to change. Tracing the nature of these changing spaces and intersections helped us to focus on particular questions about how internships and work placements develop learning for students and the contribution that HEIs can make to such discussions.

To begin we explore these two distinct but interrelated spaces; the physical and the conceptual descriptions of work placements and internships. We then outline the policy shifts and funding requirements for work placements and internships in Scotland from the first Learning to Work (2004) paper and resulting strategic funding (2006) through to the conclusion of the TSIS internships project (funded through Learning to Work 2 to the academic year 2014/15). We explore how shifting policy boundaries reflect the tensions between views of learning and knowledge and the interests of universities, employers and students in developing graduate identities (Holmes 2013, 2015) and obtaining graduate employment. Drawing on insights from the TSIS programme we identify some of the ways in which learning within the physical spaces of education and working are also subject to change. We propose that there has been a degree of re-focusing, and potentially 'narrowing', of the policy discourse related to graduate skills and employability and that the move to a supply/demand skills approach in graduate outcomes seems to be in tension with an espoused longer term economic interest of developing creativity and new knowledge for the 21st century.

Work placements and internships - physical space and pedagogic intention

Work placements, work experience and internships are all terms that are used to describe a particular space of activity with a particular pedagogic intent – in this context preparing a student or graduate for work. Importantly, within these terms is an understanding that this particular space for learning locates the student physically within workplace. This differs from work related learning for students which may include industry related projects, simulations or practice environments situated within educational establishments. Whilst the terms work placement, work experience and internships have long been used in the context of schools and colleges their use at university level has increased over the last 10 years. This terminology has broadened the notion of the long established 'sandwich' degrees for vocational degrees such as engineering or social work which tended to be associated with professional recognition. Work placements and work experience are now used extensively across all disciplines at HE level, particularly in association with initiatives relating to graduate employability (ASET 2014, Wilson 2009). Research reports have repeatedly reiterated that structured work experience and work-based learning approaches are key tools in developing both initial and continuing employment opportunities for graduates (Lowden et al. 2011; Mason et al. 2006).

The various terms which describe work placement or internship activities tend to be used rather loosely in relation to the period that a student spends in the physical space of the workplace. The ASET (the work-based and placement learning association) guide to good practice (2014) differentiates between the different types of workplace learning through the length of time that the student spends in the workplace. The length of time is associated with different types of learning activities implying an approach to learning based on accumulated experience and immersion in workplace practices as the underlying pedagogic approach. ASET define work based and placement learning opportunities as those that 'are a planned and integrated part of a student's programme of study at a Higher Education provider' (2014 p.4). They identify the pedagogic value of this type of learning as bringing

together 'academic theory and workplace practice, integrating the working with the learning.' (2014 p.4).

Whilst many HE providers offer internships and placements as part of an accredited programme of study internships also operate beyond the arena of HEI provision and outside their control. This type of employer led and managed internship programmes have been used in different ways by students, providing both undergraduate and post-graduation work experience. It is less clear how the links are made between working and learning in these placements, or where the responsibility for making such links may lie.

Although the term internship is a relatively recent phenomenon in the UK context [³] the term is increasingly used by universities and has come to encompass a broad spectrum of paid and unpaid positions across different industries and sectors (Lawton & Potter 2010). While there is no clear consensus around what defines an internships, attempts have been made to provide a schematic overview of the characteristics of a 'typical' internship. Lawton and Potter highlight four key aspects although, as noted by ASET, as there are a variety of approaches taken to internships these understanding remain subject to debate:

a) Length

Internships tend to last for at least three months and can run to six or 12 months.

b) Time commitment

Interns usually have an agreement to work set hours – so a full-time intern would usually be expected to put in the same hours as a full-time, paid member of staff.

c) Work expectations

Interns are usually required to complete specified pieces of work and to work towards set goals or deadlines. They may also have their performance monitored and evaluated.

d) Contribution

Interns usually conduct work which would otherwise be done by someone else, probably a paid member of staff, and so make a significant and valuable contribution to an organisation.

(Lawton and Potter 2010 p. 4-5)

Again there is a core notion of student learning taking place in the physical environment of the workplace, although internships may not be an integral part of the programme of study or recognised by 'credit' from the HE provider. The rewards are instead more broadly the financial contract to work and the opportunity to become a full member of the workforce. Guile and Lahiff (2013) identify the goal of internship as the 'development of sector/company-specific expertise, personal and professional identity and entrepreneurial flair' (2013 p.16). There is less explicit connection to the curriculum of HEIs or academic learning, rather an emphasis on the individual developing an identity as a worker.

The underlying assumption about learning here is that the physical space of the workplace can provide a curriculum and pedagogic environment that cannot be provided within the HEI itself. This idea can be traced back to the Dearing report (1997) where it was argued that work experience could complement 'traditional academic skills' to provide a basic understanding of work that addressed the 'graduate recruitment problem most often mentioned by employers' (1997 P.136). Despite positive indicators for graduate readiness for work in Scotland [⁴] there are continued expressions of concern about specific skills such as "'business and customer awareness', 'business

acumen' and 'business knowledge and awareness', and indications that students also report low rates of self-confidence in such areas (Universities Scotland 2013, p.28). Perhaps it is these skills, which can be specific to industries, organisational cultures and roles that are more effectively developed through the pedagogic space of the workplace itself rather than a university environment.

Billett (2006) argues that the workplace constitutes a curriculum with particular 'social practices that afford experiences to participate and learn' (2006 p.45) and that there are intentional, enacted and experienced aspects acting as different facets structuring the affordances for particular types of learning within the workplace. What is learnt, and how it takes place will therefore be shaped by the workplace environment and culture. Whilst the subject/disciplinary knowledge gained by a student through an internship therefore varies by sector Guile and Lahiff (2013) suggest that 'business world' type learning is enhanced for interns more generally through:

- The experience of working within interdisciplinary and professional teams
- The generation of networks of associates and industry contacts
- Development of an understanding of the responsibilities and demands of specific work roles
- The opportunity to explore how ideas and knowledge gained from education are applied to practice and to test out how new knowledge and ideas are received in a work environment.

They go on to suggest that some of this learning is an opportunity to practice, and acts as an induction to the industry/workplace and demonstration of the capabilities of an intern – in effect an extended 'job interview' which can result in an offer of employment.

One additional aspect of the terminology of the 'workplace' as a space for learning is worth mentioning. Whilst variety in types of workplaces is frequently acknowledged, particularly the central place of small and medium sized enterprises within the Scottish economy [5], the notion of the workplace is often somewhat static and underdeveloped in terms of conceptualising changing working practices and the resultant learning opportunities that might be provided. In particular the diversity in organisational size is important. With small (0 to 49 employees) enterprises accounting for 42.3% of private sector employment in 2014 [6] and 4 in 10 of all SME's being home- based organisations [7] stereotypical views of the workplace as a large office or production site need rethinking.

This diversity in types of workplaces includes an increasing number of workers and businesses that use technology to support different workspaces and working practices: working from home/remote working, collective offices, working on the move Felstead and Jewson (2012). These different workspaces offer new and different opportunities and constraints for learning, and emphasise the development of particular skills, such as self-motivation and self-discipline, a greater range of social skills and enhanced planning and decision making skills (Felstead and Jewson 2012, cf.p155). There has been insufficient attention to the ways in which these changes within the physical spaces of the workplace support the development of such skills and worker identities.

Work placements and internships – the conceptual space of Scottish HE policy

The divergent nature of UK higher education policy across the four nations has led to a number of comparative approaches discussing aspects of HE in general (Reid and Thorburn 2011; Keating, 2005) and workplace/workbased learning more specifically (Gallacher et al, 2009, Mills and

Whittaker, 2001). However, this paper focuses on the conceptual space for policy making *within* Scotland. We agree with Kitagawa and Lightowler (2013) that the landscape within this space has become more complex, with multiple levels of governance that shape the evolution of policy. With that in mind we present evidence for our discussion in relation to the conceptual space and policy discourse of workplace learning that has formed and developed in the Scottish context through the Learning to Work initiatives (1 and 2) supported by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and the employability and graduate attributes work developed under the umbrella of the the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA Scotland) supported Enhancement Themes activities.

Our story begins with Learning to Work (2004), although, as we have acknowledged earlier, work placements and work based learning in higher education in Scotland began far earlier than that. Learning to Work - a research review and discussion paper - builds on the Dearing and Garrick reports (1997) on higher education and starts from the position that work experience occupies a different physical space to higher education 'outside the classroom' and that:

Work-related experience is important for everyone. The evidence that prospective employers look for usually goes beyond what the curriculum alone has to offer.
[...] higher education should make more provision for learners to gain experience (SFC 2004: 30)

The 'evidence' that employers are looking for here encompassed a range of technical skills, 'soft' skills and personal attributes. There was a view that the curriculum provided within HEIs at the time was not consistently supporting individuals in developing these skills and attributes.

Although work experience is mentioned, the primary pedagogic space in play is clearly that of the learning within HEIs – curriculum design (with greater input from employers), the development of employability skills and graduate attributes and academic support for reflection on learning in the workplace for those students taking up those activities. Although 'employers, society and government' are discussed as stakeholders, Learning to Work is unequivocal in stating that 'a key purpose of education is to improve the life chances of learners by developing their knowledge, skills and attitudes.' Indeed,

Learners are the main stakeholders in further and higher education. (SFC 2004: 8)

Learning to Work identified that this meant 'consciously rethinking the learning experiences we provide to equip learners to meet the challenges that they will face in the 21st century as society, the economy, the labour market, technology and the environment change.'(SFC 2004, p.1). In summary, the focus of this first tranche of work was the development of individual employability

skills to enable students to better compete within a competitive graduate market. The pedagogic focus was to embed employability skills within the HEI curriculum, for HEIs to share good practice in teaching and learning related to graduate employability and to generate a closer involvement from employers in developing the curriculum. SFC funding for this initiative ran from 2004 – 2010.

During this period, the QAA Scotland-supported Enhancement Themes facilitated a developing cross-sector focus on employability, skills and graduate attributes [8]. From 2004 to 2011 the Quality Enhancement themes included specific focus on employability, an interest which re-emerged with a more expansive perspective through the Graduates for the 21st Century theme, which focused on the defining and developing of graduate attributes. This enhancement-led approach and specific thematic focus has enabled individual HEIs to develop areas of work according to their specific institutional and student cohort needs. At the same time, the co-ordination of the attention to particular themes supported cross –sector collaboration and sharing of ideas and practice through the supportive networks of the Enhancement Themes and the related employability networks supported by Learning to Work. During this time the sector and the HEIs within it focussed on enhancing the curriculum offer and developing graduate skills and gradueness statements rather than specifically or narrowly exploring a ‘curriculum of the workplace’ or pedagogies for workplace learning.

Reflecting on the employability enhancement theme in their paper ‘Employability and the Austerity Decade’, Gunn and Kafmann (2011) point out that these funding initiatives supported a shift from variable engagement with employability among HEIs in Scotland to a general acknowledgement of the centrality of this issue and an increasingly sophisticated understanding of employability. They identify that the key research findings that have been repeatedly restated in the work are the advantages of providing work-based learning activities for students in addition to the embedding of employability within the course design process. Once again the pedagogic space of the workplace is located as offering something different (a different form of knowledge and experience) to that provided through the curriculum, teaching and learning of HEIs; something that will enable individuals to more effectively meet employer requirements.

In establishing a space for discussion and innovation the Enhancement Themes and Learning to Work supported a particular approach to policy implementation in the Scottish HEI sector. Mayes (2013) comments that ‘the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), QAA Scotland, and the very diverse Scottish HEIs, are following a well-understood policy in a way that strikes an appropriate balance for all stakeholders, between accountability and challenge on the one hand, and development and collaboration on the other.’ (p2) . This illustrates just one way in which the SFC is able to act as ‘policy transfer agent’ (Kitagawa and Lightowler, 2013); ‘translating the policy effectiveness models into certain indicators and metrics for funding allocations that influence the [...] incentivization processes at HEIs.’ (2013 p. 12). In this case the policy for HEI improvement was broadly designed, taking an emergent and collaborative approach to student employability across the whole of the Scottish university sector. Of course this is not a straightforward process, and in particular in Scotland the collective fora provided by (and critically between) the Scottish Higher Education Employability Network (SHEEN) and the various Enhancement Themes networks, could be considered as exploiting the broadly designed policy as it moved between different fields – maintaining and supporting what Bernstein calls a ‘discursive gap’ which provides opportunities for the exercise of power and agency by those who are designated as ‘recipients of change’.. It is

important that in recognising this space for creativity and debate that these opportunities are not romanticized; these complex discussions and initiatives were still subject to quality controls, funding limitations, institutional priorities and performance related goals, but there was a general agreement that innovative practices were supported (Mayes 2013).

However, from 2009, the initiation of Learning to Work 2 marked a clear distinction and shift from supporting a range of initiatives for the teaching and learning of students to a focus on teaching and learning more closely related to the workplace and work placements as a pedagogic device for meeting employer needs.

[E]mployer engagement is fundamental to employability and all development work will rely on effective employer engagement, whether at national level with national organisations or at institutional level with their key employers. It will also be important to recognise and differentiate issues for specific industry sectors, also issues for large businesses and small and medium businesses (SMEs) in all aspects of development work;

the Council's work on employability, as defined above, will contribute to the delivery of skills utilisation as set out in Scottish Government's Skills Strategy
(SFC 2010)

As a policy transfer agent the SFC had narrowed and tightened its position through funding a clear set of initiatives, building on what was now considered to be the embedded work of Learning to Work (2004) and moving across boundaries to a conceptual space outside the academic interests of HE organisations – a space focussed more directly on the workplace, employer needs, and employers as active partners (and potential funders) of opportunities. Three of the five areas for action in Learning to Work 2 were clear shifts in this direction:

- Action to develop work-related learning and work placements
- Action to develop enterprise and entrepreneurship
- Action to develop workforce development
(Batho & SFC Strategic Development Group, 2010)

This trajectory continued to be evident in the conceptual and policy space occupied by the SFC with a shift in a focus in Learning to Work (2004) on the 'individual's chances of progressing into **and through** the labour market' to the assertion that 'Universities are developing **work-ready students**' and are ' Providing industry placements and other work-related learning opportunities to give students experience of the workplace and to develop skills 'live'' (SFC 2014). Rather than equal funding being provided across the Scottish sector HEIs as in the first phase of Learning to Work, the new phase introduced bidding for funding for particular schemes. In this competitive environment

TSIS was one of four placement/work-based learning schemes which were funded by Learning to Work 2 [9].

Within this policy transfer shift, we can trace different perceptions of the employability of graduates. A move from understanding graduates as knowledgeable, developing generic employability skills within the confines of a university education to the notion of a 'work ready' graduate, with discipline specific knowledge and industry specific skills developed through experience in the workplace. Graduates ready for work in a specific field.

Insights from Third Sector Internships Scotland

Our spatial analysis identified that both the physical spaces and policy spaces for workplace learning were subject to change during the 5 years of the internship programme. However, it was significant that discourses which embedded assumptions about knowledge and the pedagogy of teaching and learning in the workplace traversed across both these spaces and remained unexplored. Through the data related to the TSIS programme, drawn from both students and employers, we highlight four areas where exploring the boundaries between, and interrelated ideas across, these two spaces can inform the policy and practice of workplace learning.

- **Small and Medium Enterprises as a workplace .**

One of the valued aspects of TSIS internships was the opportunity that students had to experience an office environment and undertake projects for which they were responsible and accountable. However, the nature of the workplace was significant. Over 93% of host organisations were micro or 'small and medium enterprises' (SMEs) with the majority of hosts falling into the micro (55%) or small (28%) categories (TSIS 2014). In practice this had an impact on the office environment in terms of both physical resources and the numbers of staff available; 56% of host organisations had fewer than ten employees, with 4 having no paid employees at all other than the TSIS intern (Caddell et al. 2014). Limited desk space and access to computers meant that some host organisations preferred part-time internships and that the support and supervision of interns as an additional staff member presented logistical problems when all staff members with the exception of the intern were part-time. Whilst only one of the interns worked entirely from home 62% of the internships were delivered on a part-time basis to suit both the student and the host [10].

The physical and financial resources of these SMEs to provide internships were also constrained by capacity issues in different ways. The funding of the internships by the SFC generated a specific relationship and value for interns as opposed to the volunteer relationship which many of these hosts were familiar with, one employer commented ' Paid interns are infinitely preferable to volunteers as the employment relationship entails full commitment and allows structured management of project resources' (Caddell, 2012 p 46). However, in difficult financial times, the ability to commit on a regular basis to hosting internships is an acknowledged difficulty for these micro and small enterprises due to the fragility of organisational continuity and the availability of sufficient staff numbers to support an internship.

For some of these hosts the recruitment process itself had implications in terms of staff time and experience and many employers noted that they would have found the management of applications and interview process 'challenging' without the support of the TSIS programme.

This not only related to the administrative management of the interview process, but also the capacity within these organisations to identify and develop specific projects and work; a new area for many of these SMEs. 'We would hire more interns but only if we could find them similar, clearly defined tasks to do with meaningful outcomes – it's not fair to interns to hire them as general dogs-bodies, and it won't really benefit the organisation either.' (Caddell, 2012 p 46)

- **Small and Medium Enterprises as providers of learning**

Work placements and internships not only deliver work and capacity building opportunities for employers but provide learning and development opportunities for students. The capacity of SMEs to provide staff for supervision and the support of learning is important and how these staff understand learning through work, and therefore how learning opportunities might be best structured, is crucial to the quality of the student experience. TSIS found that many small and micro organisations lacked confidence in their ability to manage and guide the development of a student intern and put in place specific support to address this issue (Caddell et al. 2014). Some employers were reliant on the TSIS team to offer reflective learning opportunities to students to support their learning through work placements^[11].

It would be unreasonable to expect that SME staff providing support would have had either the opportunities for, or the experience of, considering their role as an educator in relation to a pedagogy of workplace learning unless education happened to be the business in which they were involved. This raises an important question about the assumptions about how workplace learning takes place; assumptions about learning from instruction, task, role modelling and the experience of 'doing' which underpin pedagogies of learning in the workplace. Whilst an increasing body of work theorises what this might mean for learners (Brooks et al. 2012; Evans et al. 2006; Rainbird et al. 2004) rather less attention has been paid to the perspective of employers and staff in relation to their own role and their understanding of the pedagogy of learning. Many staff in these SMEs were working with their local, 'common sense' ideas about how learning took place.

The Evaluation of Learning to Work 2 identified the mixed views of employers when asked about opportunities to contribute to the university curriculum to better prepare students for work. Some employer said that they would welcome the opportunity whilst others suggested that the responsibility for curriculum decisions lies with the students and/or university. (SFC/Rocket Science UK Ltd. 2014, p76/77). Some employers regarded universities as 'experts' in learning and established conceptual boundaries around the spaces of 'learning' and 'working' even where there was a shared agenda of preparing students more effectively for employment.

- **A developmental approach to university learning**

This diversity of views from employers and students and about where the responsibility for preparing students for work should lie seemed to reflect a developmental view of learning and maturity and to contain a somewhat circular view that students were 'ready' for work when they had experienced work.. The Learning to Work 2 evaluation (SCF/Rocket Science UK 2014 p. 74) identified that 'Many employers suggested that their intern had been well prepared for the world of work, but in many of these cases, specifically stated that this was probably because the intern had already had a job before.' This linear, developmental frame of 'education-then-work' excludes life-wide experiences, other forms of part-time learning and work, and the experience of mature

students. It frames workplace learning policy as an issue of transition to the workplace as part of human development and adulthood connected to a linear approach to career stages; ideas which have been challenged by research into 21st century careers and the nature of the modern workplace (Chudzikowski 2012; Daniels 2012; Unwin et al. 2009).

TSIS employers also associated age with expectations of working experience:

“Our intern was a mature student and had a job anyway, so she [the intern] knew the world of work.”

“Well, going by some of the applications, some of them are really badly prepared for the world of work. You don’t expect someone to get to the age of 21 and not have had a job.”

The change in the policy space from recognising that students are likely to have experienced work (Learning to Work 2004) to a commitment that universities, driven by the SFC, take on the responsibility for ensuring that students are ‘work ready’ reinforces this framing of individual development of maturity as educated and subsequently exposed to working practices.

Employment and employability

For policy makers and employers the idea that work placements can act as a ‘bridge’ that facilitates transition between the physical spaces of university learning and the workplace supports the developmental frame for learning; that the outcome of higher education is ‘adulthood’ and employment. This tends to reinforce hard outcome measures of ‘employment’ as an evaluation tool to assess how well university activities prepare students for initial working life. This is reiterated in the evaluation of Learning to Work2 which highlights the need for sufficient work placements to meet student demand and the need to ‘maximise the wider employability benefits of the approach.’ This would include providing a ‘live experience’ of applying for jobs,’ and [...] ‘increase the number of placements so that students other than the more employable can gain work placement opportunities.’ (SFC/Rocket Science UK Ltd. 2014 p. 2).

There are alternatives to this approach. Taking a graduate identity perspective (Holmes 2015) internships and work placements can be framed as an important contributor to an emerging graduate identity claimed by an individual and warranted by employers and co-workers. Internships act as an opportunity to participate in a ‘liminal’ zone where the student can explore their potential graduate identity and receive feedback from employers about their potential suitability for such roles (cf. Holmes 2014, p. 232).

From a policy perspective a broader and longer term view of employability also questions this policy framing of work placements. Where employability is defined as relating to the ability of students to develop a personal approach to future learning, the development of new ideas, career development, increased self-esteem and confidence, the ‘purpose’ of work placements expands to contribute to both the future of the workplace and the national economy. Workplaces therefore have the potential to engage both students and employers in a meaningful learning experience with longer term impact, foregrounding some of the knowledge exchange and opportunities for creative and innovative interaction highlighted by many TSIS employers.

Conclusion

The Scottish national context and the data provided from TSIS provides a unique opportunity to focus on the intersections and boundaries between the physical space for workplace, student and employer experiences and the policy space that drives funding and acts as a policy transfer mechanism for workplace learning. Interrogating this relationship to generate a broader understanding of the ways in which the pedagogy of workplace learning is understood by policy makers, educators and employers can inform the policy and practice of workplace learning. As Australian Universities embed a new national strategy for 'Work-Integrated Learning' (Universities Australia 2015) and 38 nations are represented at the Global Internships Conference in Dublin in 2015, work-based learning whether labelled as internships, placements or work experience is becoming increasingly significant for those working in HEIs. Whilst not all nations adopt a policy approach across HEIs the globally competitive environment for graduate employment has ensured a new focus on the added value for employers of work-based learning alongside the traditional curriculum of HEIs.

Using the concepts of physical space and conceptual space in our analysis raised questions about how voices from the physical space of the workplace, from students and employers, are heard in HEI and policy spaces. The tensions and contrasts in the way that different stakeholders views were articulated within this 'landscape of collaboration' between universities and employers (Wilson 2012) questions how, and to what extent, understandings of pedagogies for workplace learning are shared. There are therefore implications for the ways in which policy transfer mechanisms do, or do not, focus on negotiated learning for the longer term in the interests of students, employers and the broader economy. The continual refining of policy transfer mechanisms around training for employment and skills makes a number of assumptions about employers as educators and short term economic solutions which are as yet undetermined. The implications and consequences for the labour market and economy need to be explored if HEIs are to shift from producing graduates with generic employability skills to specifically trained employees with a curriculum led by the employer/work-based learning provider. In particular, consideration must be given to the way that short and longer timeframes for economic activity shape the thinking of employers and policy discussions in relation to workplace learning and economic success.

We suggest that there are areas that would benefit from further research and development, both in relation to specific policy and workplace contexts and to inform a comparative perspective. Firstly, from a policy perspective the employer is clearly identified as the stakeholder with expertise in workplace practice, however many SME employers lacked confidence in supporting graduates in the workplace *and also* wish to develop knowledge and expertise within their organisation. The knowledge transfer element of work placements, where employers sought interns with IT, social media and other specific skills, is important and has implications for policy assumptions that employers see themselves as experts in required workplace practices. The evidence that SME employers were reluctant to get involved in curriculum design and did not see themselves as pedagogic experts has implications for policy moves to develop a closer relationship between employers and HEIs. This issue has an impact on both the potential for HEI/Employer collaboration in designing relevant curricula and in the delivery of teaching and learning in the workplace. Without support, or a mediating body between the university and the SME, many of the TSIS employers would have found it difficult to provide placements that adequately supported positive learning experiences for students,

particularly where an organisation had specifically sought an intern with skills and knowledge that were new to long term staff member.

Secondly, and related to this, are policy and employer understandings about the nature of workplace learning. Discussion by both policy makers and employers often lacked a detailed and well-articulated understanding of what different stakeholders expected from workplace learning, or what a pedagogy of workplace learning might look like. We have argued in this paper that learning in a workplace can take very different forms to that within universities – how learning is structured needs to be grounded in reality of changing workplace practices rather than vague non-specific assumptions about learning from experience and, sometimes idealised, version of the workplace.

Thirdly, funding bodies can, and do, act as a powerful policy transfer agents in relation to workplace learning in support of students, employers and universities. Focussing on the physical, the spaces and places available for workplace learning can bring into focus the nature of support required at specific points of learning, and helps us to identify the mechanisms that policy makers and universities can use to support employers and students. One example evident from the TSIS research is the need for capacity building in enabling small and micro employers to manage project and learning design and the demands of an application and selection process in organisations with little HR support. Policy shifts in the way that workbased learning is prioritised in supporting students, employers and the national economy in the longer term mean that this type of capacity building is funding dependent and difficult to maintain. In taking the needs of SMEs and student seriously thought needs to be given to the balance between collaboration and competition for resources at a national level and how support for meaningful learning experiences for both students and employers can be sustained in the longer term.

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[Wilson, T. \(2012\) *A Review of Business–University Collaboration*, BIS/12/610, BIS, London.](#)

¹ Bernstein’s notion of the ‘pedagogic device’ can be thought of as a means of understanding how policy is implemented from its point of inception to its enactment. As a specific policy moves between different fields or spaces discursive gaps emerge which provide opportunities for the exercise of power and agency by those who are designated as ‘recipients of change, in this case Universities in generating individual organizational policies, and the lecturers and employability workers within them in working practices with students . Any policy is therefore recontextualised in the practice environment

² TSIS (2015) *Internships That Make a Difference: Third Sector Internships Scotland* . Data summary, September 2015.

³ The history of internships varies enormously in different national contexts and across professions. The term has a longer history, for instance, in the US, where it has emerged as a key feature of career pathways to particular professions, notably politics, medical and legal professions. Given differences in legal and educational systems, international comparisons are difficult to draw and perhaps deflect attention from the need for more detailed analysis of the emerging use of internships in the UK.

⁴ (2011 Scottish Employers Skill Survey, 90 per cent of graduates were judged to be well or very well prepared for work by employers)

⁵ SMEs account for 99.3 per cent of all private sector enterprises and 54.5 per cent of private sector employment in Scotland (Scottish Government (2012) *Businesses in Scotland 2012*)

⁶ <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Business/Corporate/KeyFacts> [accessed 01/05/2015]

⁷ <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0047/00475624.pdf> Small Business Survey Scotland 2014

⁸ For a full list of the enhancement themes see: <http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/enhancement-themes/completed-enhancement-themes>

⁹ The others being: E-Placements Scotland, led by Edinburgh Napier University, in conjunction with the E-Skills Sector Skills Council, providing business and IT placements;

Education into Enterprise, involving the University of Abertay Dundee, colleges, the Scottish Chambers of Commerce and other agencies, providing placements primarily in SMEs;

Making the Most of Masters, a partnership between the Universities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Stirling, creating opportunities for postgraduate students to carry out work-based projects in place of Masters dissertations;

¹⁰ 20% internships were delivered in mixed mode (part-time during term, full-time in holidays), with only 18% delivered in full-time only mode.

¹¹ The working paper *Supporting reflection and skills articulation: Insights from the Third Sector Internships Scotland* (Caddell, M. and Boyle, F) explores student learning through reflection during and following internships.