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Work Placements at 14-15 years and Employability Skills

Abstract

Purpose - In the UK concern frequently has been voiced that young people lack appropriate employability skills. One way to address this is to provide work based placements. In general, previous research findings have indicated that young people find such placements useful because of help with career choice and relevant skills. However, most studies are retrospective and involve sixth form or degree students.

Design/Methodology/Approach - This investigation involved questionnaires with nearly 300 14- to 15-year-old students who provided a pre- and post-placement self-reports about their employability skills and their work-experience hosts provided ratings of employability skills at the end of the placement.

Findings - There was a significant increase in student ratings of their employability skills from before to after the placement. Although the placement hosts gave slightly lower ratings of some employability skills than the students, the two sets of ratings were reasonably close. In addition, the students had high expectations of the usefulness of the placements and these expectations were fulfilled as reported in the post-placement questionnaire.

Originality/value - These positive findings, extend our knowledge of the effects of work based placements, by focussing on the opinion of the young people themselves, using a pre- to post-placement design, by validating student self-reports with host employer ratings, and by focussing on a younger than usual age group.

Keywords Work placements, Work experience, Employability skills, Secondary school students

Introduction

It is generally agreed that equipping young people with the skills needed for employment is crucial to both their economic success and the more general economic success of the country in which they live. Furthermore, at least in the UK, employers have dissatisfaction with the employability skills of young recruits. For example, half of the employers surveyed by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) reported dissatisfaction with the skills of school leavers and about a third being dissatisfied with the skills of graduates (CBI, 2007; see also Martin, Villeneuve-Smith, Marshall & McKenzie, 2008; CBI 2017). In 2012 the CBI (2012) reported that the majority of employers were dissatisfied with employability skills of the school leavers they had recruited: 69% dissatisfied with business and customer awareness and 61% dissatisfied with self-management ability. More recently, the CBI (2016) reported that half of businesses were not satisfied with school leavers work experience. Despite a general agreement that there is a need for improvements, there are still debates and uncertainties about how best to achieve such objectives.

One suggestion to address the issues is that greater use should be made of young people's part-time working and work experiences as a basis for the development of work related skills (Howieson, 1990; Howieson, McKechnie & Semple, 2006). Such experiences can undoubtedly provide a basis for reflection and personal development. However, concerns have been expressed that the part-time employment experiences are often restricted by locality and by family contacts, issues which can compromise the opportunities of disadvantages families (Mann, 2012), although it has been argued that personal agency may enable some students to obtain appropriate placements despite poor opportunities (Waller, Harrison, Hatt & Chudry, 2012).

Another important possibility open to young people are work experience placement opportunities as part of their school based education. Several investigations started

during the 1990s in Australia have provided initial information on this topic. A description of work placement and experience programs in Australian secondary schools was conducted by Fullarton (1999). At the time these programs were taken by a high percentage of year-10 and year-11 students (84%). Fullarton found that work experience was seen as more valuable for careers, while part-time employment as more valuable for learning about 'getting on with people', although work experience/placements and part-time employment appeared to provide very similar experiences. Given the reduction in the number of students who have part-time employment in the UK these are important findings (Mann & Dawkins). Velde and Cooper (2000) also report placements being valued in terms of work experience, knowledge and options. In addition, Smith, Dalton and Dolheguy (2004) found that the students taking a vocational course in secondary schools who had a placement, compared to those who had not taken a placement on the course, rated the course as giving more assistance to the development of specific skills and experience for employment, reported higher understanding of employer needs, reported higher self-esteem and reported that the course was more useful in getting an apprenticeship or job. Other studies of young people in Australia have drawn attention to the range of different routes between different forms of work experience and later careers (Smith & Green, 2005; Green & Smith, 2006).

In relation to the UK, the 2007 CBI Employment Trends Survey revealed that many employers believed that school based work experience can help with the development of employability skills. Furthermore, in a report for the Department of Education and Skills, the CBI provided both a rationale for such placements together with suggestions about the types of employability skills that can be enhanced by these placements (CBI, 2007). The survey by the CBI revealed that just under a half of employers thought that placements definitely enhanced employability skills, although a similar number thought that while placements enhanced employability skills this was less than they would

have liked. A survey by the National Support Group for Work Experience (2008) has shown that young people have positive opinions about work experience/placements in relation to enjoyment of the placement, satisfaction with the placement, and specifically in being able to show 'a positive attitude at work' and being able to 'understand why it is good to do well at school'. Previous research on the benefits of work placements have tended to be retrospective, assessing students' thinking about placements after these have been completed and/or assessing general opinions rather than focussing on specific skills (Mann, 2012).

In the present investigation, a finer grained approach was adopted so that student ratings of their own employability skills were obtained before and after the placements, and employer ratings were also obtained after the placement. This directly tested whether student perceptions changed and whether student perceptions were similar to those of their work placement hosts.

Another aim of this research was to better understand students' feelings and attitudes about the placements so that any change in employability skills could be positioned in relation to the students' thinking. Previous research has indicated that work experience placements have benefits beyond direct changes in employability skills. Several investigations have reported that around a third of young people who take part in work experience believe that there is a strong contribution to helping with career choice and a large proportion view the placement experience as positive (National Support Group for Work Experience, 2008; Francis, Osgood, Dalgety & Archer, 2005; Renniston, Maguire, Middleton & Ashworth, 2005; Mann, 2012; see also Mann & Dawkins, 2014). For example, in a survey of 19-24 year-olds, 57% reported that placements had helped in terms of deciding on their career (Mann, 2012). Furthermore, Yates, Harris, Sabates and Staff (2011) report that clarity and realism of career aspirations at 16 is related to later labour market outcomes, with a close

relationship between career uncertainty and status as Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET).

Although there is in broad terms, agreement about the nature of work related and employability skills there is no agreed, detailed list (see Greatbatch & Lewis, 2007; Gulie & Griffiths, 2001; Lanning, Martin & Villeneuve-Smith, 2008; Overtoon, 2000; Matters & Curtis, 2008; the Allen Consulting Group, 2006; Nunn, 2008; Belt, Drake & Chapman, 2010; Rosenberg, Heimler & Morole, 2012; Wilton, 2014). Issues also have been raised about different components of such skills in terms of the degree to which they are context specific and whether or not they involve attitudes and values (Hyslop-Margison, 1999). Proposals made about the nature of employability skills relevant to school based placements in the CBI report (2007) have been used in the present research. The CBI report concerned just over 100 companies. The focus was on 14 to 16 year-olds and their work placements, an age group particularly relevant to the present investigation. Over 90% of employers thought the following employability skills should be possessed by school leavers: oral communication skills, self-management, numerical skills, application of information technology, written and communication skills, team working, with slightly lower percentages for problem solving and customer care. The CBI scheme was endorsed by the Department for Children, Schools and Families in their Guide (2009). The National Support Group for Work Experience report (2008) based on over 15000 student responses identified similar employability skills. Related findings about employability skills have been provided by Martin et al. (2008) from an online survey of over 1000 employers, and the UKCES report (2009) provides a conceptual model about employability skills. More recent reports, such as the UK Commission's Employment Skills Survey 2013, have extended the CBI approach.

In our investigation, nearly 300 students from two schools in Milton Keynes took part. The students were aged between 14 and 15 years and the placement was organised by a local provider (name withheld for anonymity). The present study was carried out to address two questions. The first concerned whether young people's perception of their employability skills was increased by work placements from before to after the experience. To help validate the student ratings, employers also provided ratings about the same skills at the end of the placement. This is a more detailed investigation of employability skills than in many previous investigations and therefore has the potential to provide a better understanding of student and employer opinions. The second question we addressed concerned more general effects of the placement related to enjoyment, careers and learning as these provide a context for any changes in employability skills.

Method

Participants

The 296 students who were aged between 14 and 15 years were from two schools in Milton Keynes, UK, the schools were similar and had mixed middle and lower socio-economic status catchment areas. Two hundred and forty employers completed an end of placement ratings of the students. The employers were drawn from a pool of approximately 900, and were selected depending on the suitability of their placement to the students, location of placement and the opportunity for a placement at the time. The employers were of a range of different types, public/private, small/large, range of job types over various sectors and there was no discernible predominance of any particular type.

The study had ethical approval from the relevant University Ethic Committee.

Materials

The students and employers were asked to rate the students' employability skills using the same set of items (see Table 1). The participants gave a rating of Very good (4) to Poor (1) on a 4-point scale. The employability skills were those identified by the CBI (2007) with adaptation to provide information about the type of skills being described. The students also answered additional questions about 'My career and placement' to provide information about their experience and thinking (see Table 5).

Please insert Table 1 about here

Some students and employers did not provide ratings on every topic as there was an option to provide 'not applicable' as an answer. In the pre-placement questionnaire, the items were responded to by between 290 and 296 students. For the post-placement questionnaire it was noticeable that there were fewer students answering items about writing and IT (229 and 223 ratings respectively), otherwise there were between 279 and 290 ratings to the questions. There were 232 employers who provided answers to most questions at the end of the placement, the following items had fewer than 232 responses: appropriate independence (205 ratings), good suggestions (201 ratings), understands/follows instructions (123 ratings), number/IT (110 ratings), and writing (109 ratings).

Procedure

The investigation took place at the end of the school year in June and July. The day after a briefing assembly, the students completed a pre-placement questionnaire. A few days later the students took part in a 2-week work placement. The students completed their post-placement questionnaire either 4 or 5 days after the end of the placement.

Results

Ratings of Employability Skills: Students and Employers

Did the student ratings of their employability skills increase from before to after the placement? Before the placement, the students rated their employability skills reasonably positively with the mean ratings usually above 3 (see Table 2). The students mean ratings increased from pre- to post-placement with the average improvement of .4 of a point (13.3%). For all the employability skills these improvements were significant according to a paired samples t-test (see Table 2 for details), this suggests that these findings would also occur in other student groups.

Please insert Table 2 about here

Did students or employers give higher ratings of employability skills at the end of the placement? The average ratings of the employers were also positive. Table 3 shows that in general the students tended to rate their own employability skills as higher than their employers did, although the average gap was only .2 of a rating. It should be noted that there are slight differences in the data for Tables 2 and 3 because not all employers provided ratings and therefore there were more comparisons in the student-student analyses than the student-employer analyses. For a number of skills there was a significantly higher student than employer rating using a paired samples t-test. These skills were: engages/flexible; good relations; appropriate independence; understands business success; communication, and positive attitude. In two instances the employers gave significantly higher ratings than the students. These were for good suggestions and understands/follows instructions. In three instances there was no significant difference between the students' and employers' ratings (time keeping, appearance and number/IT skills).

Please insert Table 3 about here

Analysis of 'Very Good' ratings of Employability Skills

Given the restricted range of ratings it is instructive to consider the percentage of students and employers who gave a rating of very good (4) about their employability skills. Before the placement, these ratings of particular skills ranged from 17% to 57%

for the students (see Table 4). The highest percentages were for understands/follows instructions and a positive attitude, those with the lowest percentages were writing and good suggestions. After the placement the percentage of students who gave themselves ratings of 'very good' had, as one would expect from the mean scores, increased and these ranged from 28% to 82%. The skills which had the highest ratings were time keeping and understands/follows instructions; the lowest percentages remained writing and good suggestions. There were large increases in these percentages and this suggests that the students were developing more confidence about their abilities in an environment where they could see the direct application of such skills.

Please insert Table 4 about here.

For most skills, the employers gave a lower percentage of 'very good' ratings, although these percentages were not that different from those of the students. Notably the employers gave a higher percentage of 'very good' ratings to writing and number/IT skills than the students did, although it was the case that many employers did not provide ratings for these skills. Time keeping and appearance were rated the most highly by the employers and the lowest ratings were of understanding what contributed to the success of the business, making useful suggestions and writing.

Student Ratings of Placement, Careers and Satisfaction

Before and after the placement the students provided ratings of their agreement to the statements given in Table 5. A rating of 4 indicated 'Really agree' and 1 indicated 'Don't agree at all'. Thus, ratings of 3 and 4 were above the mid point and indicated agreement with the statement.

Please insert Table 5 about here

There was a very positive attitude to the placement before it began, with high expectations shown in the following items, looking forward to the placement and enjoying the placement. These expectations were fulfilled with a slightly higher

percentage of students reporting that they enjoyed the placement, and nearly three quarters reporting that they would like to go on another placement. The latter finding suggests that many students found the placement a valuable experience.

Nearly three quarters of the students reported that they knew what career they would like before the placement and this did not change appreciably as a result of the placement. For just over half of the students the placement matched the career that they would like. In addition, 64% of the students thought that the placement had helped them decide on their career.

A high percentage of the students had high expectations that they would learn a lot from the placement, and this expectation was fulfilled (82% before and 87% after). A lower percentage of students thought the placement would change them, and here again the expectation was fulfilled.

The students appeared to have gained confidence from the placement as a much lower percentage after the placement believed that they needed to improve their employability skills (before 71% vs after 45%). There also was a slight increase in the percentage of students who felt they had a lot to offer employers.

Discussion

The students who took part in the work placement reported an increase in their own employability skills from before to after the placement. For all the skills there was a significant increase in the ratings. Overall there was a 13.3% increase in student ratings from 3.21 to 3.61. The students began with a generally positive view of their skills and this was enhanced by the placement. In addition, there was a particularly striking increase in the percentage of students who rated their employability skills as very good. Before the placement these ranged between 17% and 57%, after the

placement these ranged from 28% to 82%, with large increases for time-keeping and appearance.

Previous research, often based on retrospective reports, also has identified that students believe that placements are beneficial to their skills. The NEBPN survey of just over 15,000 pupils reported that around 90% believed that they had developed a range of employability skills or were able to demonstrate these during the placement. The figures from the present investigation involving a prospective pre- to post-placement changes in specific employability skills should increase confidence in the findings of previous retrospective research.

It might be argued that the student ratings reflect over confidence about employability skills. Although there may be an element of truth in this suggestion, there also was convincing evidence that the employers had similar views to those of the students about employability skills. For most employability skills the students gave significantly higher ratings than the placement hosts (engages/flexible, good relations, appropriate independence, understands business, communicated well, follows instructions and positive attitude), however, the overall size of the difference was not particularly large (3.54 vs 3.46). Furthermore, in some cases the employers gave significantly higher ratings than the students (understands/follows instructions, making good suggestions) and for some skills there was no significant difference between student and employer ratings (time keeping, appearance, and numeracy/IT skills). Interestingly, both the students and the employers gave highest ratings to time-keeping and appearance. Consequently, although the students tended to give higher ratings to their own employability skills than the employers did, this difference was not so large to call into question the students' ratings.

Thus, there should be a degree of caution about interpreting the student's self-reports. In relation to this it is worth pointing out that when designing the investigation, the

possibility of the placement hosts providing initial ratings was considered, but this was thought impractical because the hosts would have had limited time to observe the students. Future research which uses more objective measures could increase confidence in the findings of the present research.

These generally positive views about placements in 14-15 year olds can usefully be considered in relation to the Wolf Review (2011) which recommended that providing work experience for 14-15 year olds should no longer be a statutory responsibility of schools. Although, there are disagreements with this viewpoint (e.g. Mann, 2012; Belt et al., 2010). The findings from this investigation provide evidence that work placements in a 14-16 age group assist with the development of employability skills, are enjoyed and are valued by students. It also can be argued that although work placements at this age are further in time from adult employment than those carried out at later ages, the placements for the 14-16 age group provide an early experience of the work place which can help to focus and motivated school and college work in the sixth form years. Furthermore, there is increasing emphasis being given the voices of young people when consideration of issues of importance to them. The findings in this report suggest that 14 and 15 year olds enjoy, value, and believe that they receive benefits from work placements; it is important to listen to their voice about this issue.

Information was also obtained about student satisfaction, help with careers and views about the need to increase employability skills. Each of these are considered in turn. The students showed a high level of satisfaction with the placements. Before the placement more than three quarters of the students were looking forward to the placement, thought they would enjoy it and thought they would learn a lot from the placement. After the placement, there were slight increases in these figures with 86%

reporting that they had enjoyed the placement and 87% had learnt a lot from it. In addition, nearly three-quarters reported that they would like to go on another placement. These figures about enjoyment are comparable to those obtained in previous UK based studies (93% for National Support Group for Work Experience, 2008 and 87% for CBI, 2007). Thus, schools can be confident that the majority of their students will enjoy work placements and consider that the placements are of benefit to employability skill development.

Previous research indicates that work placements help students in their career choice, with around two-thirds of students reporting that placements are helpful and a further third reporting that placements are very helpful (National Support Group for Work Experience, 2008; Francis, Osgood, Dalgety & Archer, 2005; Renniston, Maguire, Middleton & Ashworth, 2005). The group of students who took part in the current study appeared to have reasonably clear ideas about their career, and this did not change as a result of the placement, although many of the students (64%) reported that the placement had helped with career choice. Thus, our findings involving pre- and post-placement questionnaires, are similar to those of previous investigations.

In relation to careers it also should be noted that experience in a workplace was identified by the UK Commission's Employer Skills survey as an important gap in young people's employability skills, and that lack of recruitment of young people was often due to competition from more experienced individuals, suggesting that placements can benefit young people when they apply for employment. Furthermore, experience of work placements at a comparatively early age can send signals to interviewers about the knowledge and motivation of prospective employees and it is significant that the majority of pupils wished to have further work placements which would further enhance their knowledge of the workplace.

The placement appears to have enhanced the student beliefs about their employability skills. Three quarters thought that they needed to improve these before the placement, while just less than half thought this was necessary after the placement. There is an element of concern that this confidence might be misplaced. However, as already discussed there does seem to have been a reasonable relation between student and employer ratings of employability skills. Furthermore, it is generally acknowledged that confidence is an important element in job success so that confidence in employability skills could have positive benefits for the students.

An important additional consideration about the value of placements is that they may reproduce social-economic inequalities and fail to challenge stereotypes about gender related employment. Hatcher & LeGallais (2008) in their study of 10 schools found evidence that the choice of placement often corresponded to the socio-economic characteristics of the pupils. They recommend that where appropriate schools should intervene to increase the aspirations of their pupils. A study by Osgood, Francis & Archer (2006) has drawn attention to a similar need to support males in placements which involve stereotype-challenging roles such as those involving early childhood education and care. These are important messages for those who arrange placements (see also a recent UKCES report (2014) concerning the organisation of work placements).

To summarise, the findings from this investigation add to the evidence about the benefits of work placements. In particular, students in the 14-16 age group reported that work placements assisted with the development of employability skills, were enjoyed and were valued. Furthermore, the investigation showed a pre- to post-test change in most of the self-ratings of employability skills, and provided evidence that student self-ratings were similar to those of host employers. These findings provide

additional evidence about the value of work placements, which is based around the views and attitudes of the students who are taking part in the activity.

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