

Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode 10: How do students and organisations get value out of work placements?

Speakers: Dr Helen Hughes and Dr Sally Moore

Helen: Hello and welcome to Leeds University Business School's Research and Innovation Podcast. I'm Helen Hughes.

Sally: And I'm Sally Moore.

Helen: And in today's podcast, we're going to be talking about an ongoing research podcast of ours, that we're both involved with, which is looking at student work placements and the value that they offer to all the different stakeholders. So, Sally, shall we start by thinking about what a work placement is?

Sally: Yes. It's really interesting, and I think students are interested in doing placements for lots of different reasons. And I know that at Leeds University and at the Business School and the School of Food Science and Nutrition, where I'm based, it's a feature of our degrees.

Helen: Yes, for sure. And I think, for me, really, a work placement is really any kind of university-supported work experience that is going on in an organisation. In the Business School here, our placements, certainly in the work I'm involved in, tend to be about nine to twelve months. But I think they do vary in length, don't they? Yours are much shorter?

Sally: Yes. No, no, normally about nine months minimum, twelve months is the average, but I know there are internships that are three months, and students might do a combination, six months in one place, six months in another.

Helen: Yes, and sometimes they are paid, sometimes they are unpaid, sometimes they are credit-bearing and sometimes they are not. So, I think, really, the core feature is that they are supported by a university. But actually they are a staple feature in a business degree and increasingly common, I think, across other areas of academic education, particularly with the pressures for employability being so great now for organisations like ours. So, I think it's clear that placements are common for lots of different reasons, but I think there is... for me, what is really quite interesting are the different stakeholders that benefit from a placement. I think we've talked about this before, haven't we,

Sally? The idea of how attractive a placement is for an employer?

Sally: Yes, yes. So, with a different hat on, having supervised students in the food industry undertaking placements, I can really see the value from a business perspective. But having now my academic hat on, I can really... just having conversations in the corridor with members of staff, you know, really see students grow during placements and just so often commenting on how these students are transformed when they return back from placement, it's such a nice thing to see.

Helen: Yes. I think you're right, because our students get a tremendous amount from a placement year, and for some of them it will be the first time they've ever worked in an organisation. For others, they might have had summer work, I guess, before or they might have had a role at an earlier point in their degree. But I think what is really nice with a placement is the fact it's a short term investment, really, for all the different parties. So, for a student they can, sort of, try before they buy, a little bit. They can really, sort of, have a few months and perhaps the biggest lesson they might learn is that they never want to work in that sector again. Whereas for others, they get the feeling that, actually, I've got a career here and this is definitely what I want to do.

Sally: Yes, they almost, like, when they come back to university, it's almost so different that it's a struggle. They're so professional and, you know, forward thinking. And they are the ones that, you know, are in at nine o'clock in the morning, enjoying a kind of nine to five business schedule back at university. So, yes, it's great talking to them.

Helen: Absolutely. And I think, also, the benefits of a placement are great for employers as well, because not only do they have their reputational benefits, if you like, that they can, you know, say they offer placements for universities and they, sort of, build that collaboration with a university, but they can also use it to promote their graduate schemes, for instance or, you know, they, sort of, have that footing for employability and so on with organisations.

Sally: It's great talking to placement supervisors when we go and visit our placements students in industry, and one of the supervisors told me this year that the placement students in her organisation, in the food industry, were, you know, "a flow of data", they

provided a flow of data throughout the organisation. They added such value to it. It was really great to hear that.

Helen:

Yes, I think you're absolutely right. So, I think, you know, the benefits of a placement, you know, are very clear in terms of all the anecdotal stories that we get and the value that we hear from students and the value that we hear from employers, but I think one of the reasons that, when we talked about doing this podcast, one of the reasons we wanted to do it was because whilst this an area that's really interesting to us both, particularly because of the popularity of a placement, I think it's interesting that there is just surprisingly little research about work placements. And particularly in terms of, actually, what we know a student gets from a work placement. I mean, Sally, I think probably it's useful if we just spend a moment or two just talking about what we know about the existing research on placement students. You know, certainly just to start that there is lots of anecdotal evidence, as we talked about, but surprisingly little to actually tie those placements to particular outcomes. There is evidence, for instance, that they are linked to improved employment outcomes. So, we know, for instance, that a student that does a placement tends to get a job much quicker. They tend to secure higher salaries to start with, in the first placement... sorry, in their first job post-graduation. And they also tend to have higher job satisfaction when they do start. And I think that's really positive.

Sally:

I was going to say, I can really see that, I can really so aware they are of, you know, the business world, but why are they so good? Why are they so good at getting jobs and what is it about placement that makes them grow like that? And how do they grow, you know? What do they come out with? You know, it's hard to put your finger on that, which is why, I think, your research is so important.

Helen:

Yes, thank you. And I think you're absolutely right, because what we're beginning to see, when you look at the existing literature, is that these are linked with improved academic outcomes as well, that doing a placement, you know, a student is likely to increase their, you know, their marks at graduation. So, they tend to qualify with higher degree grades, and we even... more recent studies that are beginning to show that, actually, even when you control for the fact that they had good outcomes at the start, you know, the reason they got a placement is because they were already a good student, even when you, sort of,

control for that statistically, they still do better. So, there is obviously something about a placement that helps, but, as you said, you know, why? Why do they do so much better? And I think, I guess really the trigger for us developing this research was trying to understand a bit more about that, wasn't it, Sally? I don't what your experiences are in your field.

Sally: So, you know, the students seem to come back gushing about what they've learned, and it's the knowledge and skills, applied knowledge really, sometimes, that they focus on. But we can see that they have grown as a person and their line managers tell us they have hugely increased in confidence, and sometimes they refer to a presentation they did at the start of placement where they were very, very nervous. And then, at the end of placement, you know, they were talking to 500 people, you know, in an atrium of an open plan business without flinching. So, it's, you know, it's very much anecdotal, but you're... the way that Helen, you're trying to research this area, trying to quantify that, and trying to put into words and articulate what benefits they get. It's just so interesting to bring that to life so we can talk about it more meaningfully.

Helen: Yes. Thanks Sally. So, our research, I guess, really builds on that, doesn't it? That what we're trying to do is think about exactly what a student learns while they're on placement. So, we've kind of embedded this research agenda into the pedagogy of the module. So, our students now undertake, here in the Business School and now in Food Sciences and elsewhere in the university, they now complete questionnaires before they go out on placement, in the middle of their placement, and also at the end of their placement. And then they write reflective essays, thinking about, actually, what did I learn, you know, they're looking at 124 different competencies, for instance, where they are really trying to unpick their development. And then in the middle of their placement, at the end of their placement, their line manager and a peer in the organisation also complete those questionnaires so that they can, sort of, really get that feedback and really try and understand how they are developing and where and at what time points, you know, they're doing that. I don't know what value you think your students get from that process, Sally?

Sally: Yes, I mean one of the things that has made me jump at the chance to work with you, Helen, is because, you know, the students can see some feedback throughout. So, you're

tracking, you know, before, during and end, their line manager feedback, and also their own view on their own progress. So, just to get their hands on, you know, their line manager's view of how well they're doing, I think is enormously valuable, and we know that students in general, in academia, value feedback from their lecturers, and this is... it's just the icing on the cake for these students. So, the benefit to them, to see that, and where you have described before, you know, there might be departures in what the student thinks about themselves and what the line manager thinks of the student. It's so interesting to have that conversation. So, yes, huge value to take part in this.

Helen:

Yes. And I think they do get that, you know? We certainly find that the line managers and the peers often rate the student very differently to the student. And I think that raises loads of questions about, you know, did the student get it wrong? You know, or do they lack the confidence that they actually have the abilities, but they just can't communicate that? Or do they, in some cases, have really quite inflated confidence and they've just benchmarked where they're at quite differently? And actually it's really important that the students can gauge their skills correctly, because when they go to graduate recruitment fairs and so on, and they apply for jobs, they need to be able to sell themselves. They need to be able to understand where their strengths are, and where their weaknesses are. And I think, also, the approach is really valuable for the university and institutions like ours in terms of all the stuff that we can actually do with the data that we're beginning to collect. So, we're beginning to see, for instance, that students' competencies develop at different rates, that actually different types of students want different things from placements. That their goals change, for instance, during their placements. And I think the more we know about this, the more we can develop much more targeted interventions. So, I think we've spoken, haven't we, about how you can use this data to go, "Actually our students have got a particular need in this area, so, you know, how can we track that and benchmark it and evidence-base, you know, draw that back to the evidence, and link it to, even, different sources?" So, you know, over time, with the data we've got, we're going to be able to link it to graduate outcomes, for instance. Do students who develop particular competencies during their placement end up getting particular jobs or going into particular careers? So, I think that's all really important. And most importantly, I think the more we know, and the more work we do in this area, the better we can

advise our students about their options. And I think that is, hopefully, where we can take this research.

Sally: I think you're articulating what it means to be employable, and how we can enhance our employability, I think, Helen, that's how I see it. You know, how we talk to students about employability and careers, I think, it's just got so many wide-reaching implications, really, across the university and across how we help students get careers.

Helen: Thank you. So, it's been great speaking to you this morning, Sally. And I just want to say, really, that if you are involved in this area of research around the university and you would like to be involved in the project we're doing, or just hear more about the research, please do get in touch. There are lots of details about us on the webpage, and you can find out much more about the project. So, thank you very much.

Sally: Thanks for talking to me too. It's great to be involved.

Helen: Thank you.