

Full time Study, Part Time Work: undergraduate's learning from employment

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Abstract

This paper outlines research undertaken to investigate the level and nature of full time undergraduate part time, term time employment as part of a two year project - Work Based Learning Assessment and Credit - within Huddersfield University Business School. Whilst aware that a large proportion of students have part time jobs, the type and extent of this work and the learning experiences gained by our students was less clear. A key objective of this research is to determine whether students are learning higher level skills and if this learning can be articulated. To support the rationale for introducing a work based learning module on undergraduate programmes, a survey of current undergraduates was undertaken followed by qualitative research to explore learning in the work place derived from part time employment. The research provides substantial evidence of the level of students undertaking part time work, the development of personal and social competencies along with key skills and job-specific knowledge. Additionally, with some prompting students are able to articulate the learning and provide clear examples of the source and nature of the learning. This has enabled the development and validation of a WBL module which will be evaluated during the course of the next academic year. Whilst WBL exists in a number of formats on undergraduate programmes the introduction of this new module will further add to the recognition of the skills developed and the learning achieved through part time employment which may or may not be directly linked to the course of study itself.

Introduction

Traditionally full time undergraduate students may have had little need or even desire to obtain work during term time and employment would be often limited to non-term time, earning money to fund holidays and other non-essentials. However, given the changing nature of students, the removal of the maintenance and mandatory grant system and introduction of student loans, combined with increasing numbers of students from poorer backgrounds entering full time education, term time working has become a growing phenomenon. The effect of the changes with regard to tuition fees is yet to be seen but one would assume that this could also add to the reasons for the increasing number of students undertaking part-time, term time work. A report by Mori and Unite (2004) identified that four in ten students work during term time in order to fund their studies. Universities UK (2005) set this figure slightly higher at 53%. What is clear is a steady rise in the numbers of students undertaking paid work in term time. The TUC (2006) All Work and Low Pay report suggested an increase of 50% between 1996 and 2006 of students who support themselves via employment. This indicates a possible link between the higher incidence of student work and the reduction of funding and support mechanisms from the state. At some universities surveyed by Universities UK, as many as 78% of students worked within term time with slightly lower numbers for final year students which may be a result of wanting to focus upon final year exams and assessments. There are therefore still high proportions of students who do not work in term time, some of the reasons may be due to the belief that this would not enable them to concentrate on their studies, instead a loan was more preferable. Additionally, students may have other responsibilities such as family commitments or had some kind of financial support (Universities UK 2005).

Reasons why students do work during term time are very often financially based and economic survival is cited as a major reason for working, using money to buy the essentials. The term 'essential' is open to interpretation as students may view running a car as essential, Broadbridge and Swanson (2005) which perhaps ten years ago would be regarded by students as a luxury but this is viewed as lifestyle maintenance and "youth consumption" Broadbridge (2006). One in seven students receives no financial support from family or friends (Mori/Unite 2004) and the cash is not just needed for survival but also to avoid having large debts upon graduation. Fewer students within the UUK report (2005) suggested that it was for the work experience that the job provided. This may suggest that the work is not deemed as relevant to the course of study and perhaps not viewed as helping with academic study or employability upon graduation but a means to an end. Broadbridge and Swanson (2005) argue that too much emphasis is placed on finance as the reason for working and that the literature "fails to consider the changed social context of student employment" and students perceived benefits from working are beyond purely financial survival. What is clear is that changes to student financing linked with increasing numbers of students from widening participation backgrounds necessitates employment in some cases but enhanced employability and developing networks are benefits seen by others.

Effects of Part Time Work on Study

University UK research showed that almost half of all students who worked in term time found juggling work and study a problem. Difficulties in juggling a full time course and employment could result in missing lectures or being too tired which may be particularly true of students working unsociable hours and late nights which is prevalent in bar and restaurant type work. In some instances employers may be flexible and allow negotiation of hours, Watt and Pickering (2000) although some evidence points to little empathy and understanding with employers and students feel pressurised to take on more hours than originally agreed Curtis (2002). Again care should be taken not to focus solely on the negative aspects of term time work although this certainly gives greater justification for enabling students to spend less time learning in the classroom and instead use their time “to complete assignments or collect data for assignments” Hodgson and Spours cited in Broadbridge (2006). What may also be seen is enhanced confidence and self esteem due to their recognition at work which can improve their performance in the classroom and their ability to relate aspects of academic learning to workplace learning.

What Do Students Learn From Their Part Time Employment?

Studies at Brighton University (2000) found respondents perceiving a number of positive effects as they were acquiring transferable skills, their confidence increased, time management and organisational skills improved and employability was enhanced. University UK (2005) surveyed students working in term time and found that a large proportion thought the job helped to develop useful skills, although only limited numbers said their job gives the opportunity to apply knowledge and skills from studies to the work in many cases because they did not consider their job to be related to the course of study. An earlier study by MORI (2004) however did suggest that students felt they were gaining skills which will be useful in the future, therefore although they may not recognise the usefulness of the skills at the moment, they are viewed to have potential use at a later stage. Broadbridge and Swanson (2005) suggest that in part, focusing on the negative effects of term time employment could be due to the framing of the questions which gives rise to this. Perhaps greater emphasis should be upon asking students positive aspects of employment rather than prompting students to suggest work is a means to an ends.

When considering the work that students undertake it is suggested that they may not value or even recognise the skills that are being developed Frame (2000) or perhaps what they are learning they feel is relevant only to that job without the recognition that the skills are transferable. This may be the result of limited ability or experience on reflecting upon experience and articulation of learning, something which higher education could assist with and develop, Kolb (1984) Honey and Mumford (1992). Work related skills which are transferable across work roles are being developed, irrespective of the job along with skills such as “survival skills such as how to get along with others and handle one’s boss” Curtis (2002). Curtis considers that students often gain “considerable expertise in areas such as how mortgages work, what information call centre databases contain” which clearly shows that assumptions the low level nature of skills within particular jobs or because the job is part-time are unfounded. Brennan and Little (2006) agree that full time students working part time, in addition to learning skills and competencies, may be learning “about themselves and relationships with others and about organisations which employ them” Learning is not just restricted to skills and competencies of undertaking a specific job but also gaining insight into the employing organisation, the relationships between workers and an understanding of themselves, their motivations, attitudes, values and beliefs. This learning can only be developed through experiencing the workplace and again encouraging students to broaden their understanding of the workplace enhances employability as awareness can be communicated to potential employers.

Frame’s (2000) view is that the ability to reflect on the experience gained through part time work is of more importance than the work itself as outlined by Little *et al.* (2006) who state that “it is not necessarily the experience of work itself that is paramount – rather it is the learning that an individual derives from that experience of work and from reflecting upon it.” In effect learning can take place whatever job is being undertaken; it is the internalisation, articulation and reflection upon the learning derived from this work that is of key importance. Work based learning within higher education recognizes the legitimacy of the workplace as a source of learning Connor (2005) and it is increasingly recognized that developing higher level skills is not restricted to the learning within the four walls of a higher education environment. Workplaces provide a rich source of learning and knowledge development. Much learning can be gained within places of employment including those where students are faced with difficult situations that require them to solve problems and

resolve issues new to them. Learning comes from reflecting on the situation and understanding the factors of influence and how this can be applied to future scenarios.

Methodology

The aim of the research project is to determine the incidence and nature of student part-time, term-time work in addition to exploring the student's ability to understand, articulate and reflect upon the learning that is taking place within work. Whilst we are aware, through conversation, that many full time students work on a part time basis, in order to explore and quantify the incidence of student term time employment and their opinions on the 'value' of their work, a self completed questionnaire was carried out with 343 full time Undergraduate Students in Huddersfield University Business School (the school currently has 1,794 students including 75 on sandwich placement). The questionnaire was distributed within lectures/seminars for the core modules across all three years and all courses during week commencing 27th November 2006. Whilst the questionnaire revealed a high incidence of term time work as well as the types of companies employed in and in many cases positions of responsibility held, it was determined that a greater understanding and insight into the work, skills and experiences gained was required. Therefore, further qualitative interviews were programmed with the students. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten students who worked in a variety of roles within various sectors. This enabled a further exploration of the quantitative findings and in particular enabled insight into student's places of work and if these were considered by students as sites of learning. In addition, the qualitative interviews were especially helpful in shedding light on whether students could actually articulate or reflect on the learning from and within the workplace which is considered essential to Work Based Learning and therefore supported the rationale for a module within the undergraduate programmes.

Results from Student Questionnaires

From the 343 questionnaires responses, 226 (65.9%) of students currently had a part time job in term time, with the majority of students (92%) working 6 hours or more per week, approx 34% working 10 – 14 hours and a similar percentage working 15 hours or more. This is somewhat higher than the University UK figure of 53% in 2005 but inline with 5% increase per year suggested by the TUC (2006).

Type of Work Undertaken

The following table shows the types of company worked for with similar numbers of students working for supermarkets, retail stores and bar/restaurants/hotel.

	Type of company	
	Count	%
supermarket	48	21.1%
retail store	48	21.1%
manufacturing company	7	3.1%
contact centre	16	7.0%
bar/restaurant/hotel	50	21.9%
other	59	25.9%
Total	228	100.0%

The high predominance of employment within supermarkets, retail and leisure is evident, however the figure for 'other' is interesting as it includes: Hospitals and NHS departments, a sports company, estate agents, banks and other financial institutions, government departments including immigration, local council office and Revenue & Customs along with roles within marketing and accountancy practices.

Types of Contact at Work

The table below indicates the percentage of students in part time work that come into contact with customers, suppliers, distributors, managers and other staff through their work. This question was asked to determine the level of interaction and whether skills in dealing with different stakeholder groups were utilised.

	Customers	Suppliers	Distributors	Managers	staff other depts
	87.2%	25.2%	12.4%	88.1%	65%

Skills Utilised Through Employment

The results from this question are in line with the types of environments work in, as one would expect there would be a high level of customer contact requiring communication and team working skills. What is notable here in particular is the level of students in supervisory roles which again suggests that the work is somewhat more than menial.

Supervisory	Cash handling	Customer care	Admin	Problem solving	Commun.	Team work	IT skills	Marketing	Sales
29.9%	66.2%	78.4%	26.4%	47.6%	77.1%	85.3%	35.1%	19.5%	44.2%

Qualifications, Progression and Careers

24.2% (54) students indicated that qualifications were not needed for the job which links to the type of jobs undertaken, although 45.4% of year 3 students said qualifications were required which perhaps may indicate a change in the type of job undertaken as undergraduates progress through their study. 76% of students responded that there were opportunities to develop with the role which is a positive statement given that we are aiming to introduce credit for workplace learning. With development opportunities this should enable students to set learning objectives and show personal and professional development. Despite this positive correlation, 69% of students (152) did not see the job as career building, indicating perhaps that the job is undertaken as a means to an end. Year 4 responses were slightly less than this, with 47.4% regarding the work as career building this could be the result of continuing employment within the placement company or a greater focus on developing employability.

Effect of Term Time Work on Study

Whilst research outlines the adverse effects term time employment has on student studies Curtis & Shani (2002) Watts (2002) Hunt, Lincoln and Walker (2004) 55.5% of the students surveyed indicated that the experience gained from work helped with their studies and thus a positive correlation can be found. This percentage figure was roughly the same for years 1 – 3, with 10% more of year students indicating work helped with academic study.

Academic Credit for Learning at Work

71.4% of those in part time work also indicated that they would like to be able to take a module which enabled them to gain academic credit for their work based experience. However only 30% of students felt their part time work was worthy of academic credit, with no real distinction between year of study. This may however be the lack of ability to be able to equate learning in the workplace to learning from academic modules. What will be shown below is that through interviews, this view of comparability was recognized. Of these students, 73.6% were given training for their current part time job which indicates that there are specific skills which are required in order to effectively carry out the job, no doubt job related skills and those pertinent to the employing company. Given that the majority of students work in excess of 6 hours per week, this may be seen as a way of alleviating the pressure of balancing work and study.

Student Interviews

In-depth, face to face, semi-structured interviews were conducted between January and February 2007 to explore the learning that takes place at work. Students across all years and courses were interviewed about why they work. When asked about the reasons for working during term time, all interviewees' first response that it was for financial reasons, in some cases "purely financial" or other responses such as "to fund the weekend" and to stay out of debt as there is no family/parental support. However all did suggest other reasons such as it being a good place to work where they can get involved in social aspects arising from the work, gain satisfaction from the job and it was viewed that the work would stand them in good stead for the future, enhancing their employability. In terms of what is gained from work, interviewees highlighted both personal benefits such as increased confidence and maturing and learning skills particular to the company and job in addition to the generic skills such as communication, team work and problem solving.

Work Helping With Studies or studies Helping Work?

Response to the first include: "provides a lot of experience that link with business studies", "lots of things do (in business) come up with that we do at work" showing some evidence of being able to apply what is learned in the workplace to the classroom. What seems to be a common theme is being able to apply what they see at work to the theories studies in the classroom. For example one student who works in fashion retailing has

been studying merchandising and store layout and atmospherics and she can relate this to work. Equally she feels she can use her knowledge gained at University and apply it to the workplace, therefore thinks about the things she has learnt and how that may apply in the work environment. One student studying Law felt that his work (in a jewellery retailers) does not help with his studies at all, however later in the interview he made the point that he does in fact juggle a number of part time jobs and this has enabled him to improve his social skills, develop his language, increase his patience; all transferable skills yet not subject specific which evidently this student saw as a benchmark. One negative was that one student felt he was “missing out on Uni life” and next year he may look for an alternative job which will give him more free daytime hours to become involved in other aspects of university life instead of it all being just work and study. This is a noticeable effect of work within HUBS as students tend not to mix, socialise or form study groups as they come on campus for set lectures and leave for work. This is something which is also being worked at within the business School to develop a greater sense of community amongst business students.

Juggling Work and Study

All interviewees suggested the work fits round their studies rather than facing any issues of work interfering with their university timetable. Only one student said that their employer previously put pressure on them to work more hours however others suggested that they were the ones in control of their work patterns and most companies appeared willing to change hours as required. The interviews did not specifically ask for negative implications and no student suggested that there were any ill-effects of working and studying, the positive effects were highlighted which confirms that framing questions is essential. Students were not suggesting all is rosy in the places of work, they deal with difficult situations, have positions of responsibility and the jobs they undertake are not necessarily the type of work they would do upon graduating, again perhaps reflecting what they feel they are gaining as a result of working. As one student commented “I wish I could get on and get the job I want to do rather than ‘have to do’”.

What Do Students Learn at Work?

When asked about what they learnt at work, most students focused upon the transferable skills including:

- Time management, self management and working under pressure;
- How to prioritise work and organisational skills
- Working with others, how to deal with people and social skills
- Dealing with difficult situation, conflict
- Self monitoring skills, patience, remaining calm and not being “hot headed” as one student put it.

Further questioning to determine what is learnt about the company, industry and the world of work, did open up responses which were more about ‘technical’ or job related skills and the general environment in which the organisation operates. How competitive the industry is (retail and fashion) were highlighted by the students working in those environments one student commenting on how the store had to “always try to be unique and bring more attention to them” keeping an eye on competitors was also seen as something they had learnt. Incidentally, this student commenced a full time sandwich placement in June 2007 and is still undertaking the part time work, although less hours, as she has developed such a strong social group and network at work. There were also comments about learning how people interacted, how people were treated and in one environment how there had to be a “lot of sucking up to get anywhere.. have to be very clever ... learn what to say when.” These responses fit well with emotions in the ASKE model adapted by Frame (2001). Students saw how they had to be self regulating and manage the way they performed and interacted with colleagues and managers.

Students as Reflective Practitioners

What is clear is that with some prompting, students are able to articulate their learning. Part of the research project objectives is to develop students as reflective practitioners; something which is worked upon within the skills based modules in year 1 and 2. Clearly more support is required to assist students using this skill within the work environment to fully internalise the learning processes that take place. Classrooms are not exclusively sites of learning; learning through, from and in work produces new knowledge which can be fed back to the classroom developing the connection between academic theories and real world experiences. Students do not appear to be working just for the money as they are able to demonstrate a great deal of development in terms of their social skills, technical competencies and transferable skills which is both enhanced by and enhances their study. A module that encourages students to use the workplace as a site of learning and enrich the learning through the curriculum should be viewed as a positive addition to the current undergraduate curriculum.

WBL within HEI Business Schools

Telephone contact was made with 30 other Business Schools to determine the extent of work based learning on undergraduate courses and the models in use. The following results were received:

- 40% of business schools do not have work based learning on traditional three year undergraduate degrees.
- The remainder offered WBL modules of varying credit value (between 15 and 30) and at all years sometimes being a compulsory element for those students who had not undertaken a sandwich degree.

Whilst the number of Business Schools contacted is small, this does show evidence of a number of Universities developing more vocational input into the curriculum and recognizing the value of the learning from the workplace.

The Proposed WBL Module

A Personal Development and WBL module was validated at school level in June 2007 through development of necessary documentation including a robust rationale for the module. The module had already been highlighted to year one students and once validated a small cohort has been enrolled onto the module for the academic year 2007/2008 during which time evaluation will take place through monitoring of students, undertaking interviews and creating case examples of student development. Assessment of WBL is an on-going area of research and debate. For this module, portfolios, reflective journals, a project report and presentation will be used whilst additional research will consider other assessment tools.

Five, 2 hours workshops will run as outlined below.

Week	Title	Concepts
1	Introduction to Module	What is work based learning Skills and knowledge developed in the workplace Maintaining a learning log & Collating evidence
3	Reflection and articulation of learning	Techniques for reflection in the workplace Reviewing feedback within the workplace Enhanced learning diaries
5 & 7	Developing Creativity	An introduction to tools for creativity The importance of creativity and enterprise
9	Project Planning	Selecting a work based project. Learning Contracts Managing the project. Risk Analysis
12	Formative Assessment	Portfolios to be submitted for formative assessment
13 - 23	Project development	One-to-one tutor contact developing project. Writing the project report. Presentation preparation
24	Presentations	A presentation on your individual development within the workplace + a review of the project

Conclusion

Whilst it was agreed that the WBL was well placed to be offered at Intermediate level, the appropriateness of this is a consideration. Reflective writing skills have started to be developed in year one which are crucial for reflection on the learning in the workplace and will also act as a further way of developing reflection from the placement in year three. One potential concern is whether the availability of the module will reduce student's willingness to apply for a placement as year 3 of the course of study and a great deal of work within the School has been undertaken to increase placement take-up. Further research is therefore required to determine whether such a negative impact is likely to occur. Further research will be carried out to determine whether WBL modules should be a compulsory part of the undergraduate courses in order to assist students with reflection upon work activities which will be of assistance when applying for employment as the portfolio will be a useful tool at interview and it will also help with further CPD which requires reflection and target setting once students graduate and embark upon their careers. The introduction of this module only scratches the surface of Work Based Learning project currently engaged in. A great deal more is being done to ensure that as a Business School and as part of the Employer Engagement agenda and University wide policy which will require that further work is carried out to support the work based learner, not just those students on a full time degree.

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