

***ASET Annual Conference 2014***

***The Student Journey towards Employability***

**Research Paper**

**Title:** Is it the placement that counts? A small scale phenomenological study of 'gap year' accounting and finance students.

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**Abstract (407 words):**

This research came about through my interest in students' learning whilst on periods of work experience as part of their four year accountancy and finance undergraduate degree programme. Approximately half of students studying the degree at my own institution opt to undertake a period of formal university approved work experience between the second and final year of the degree (sandwich placement). A small proportion of students who have opted to take the placement route are unsuccessful in securing a university approved placement and return to their final year having engaged in various activities (previously largely unknown to university staff) during this 'gap year'. As far as I have been able to establish, no previous research has been undertaken on this particular group of students. Importantly, given that a growing body of literature points to the "good news story" of placement (Auburn, 2007:119), are we in danger of attributing an impact to the placement year that may have come about irrespectively of the experience? My research investigates the extent to which the experiences of gap year students compare to those reported in previous research concerned with placement students.

Much previous work exploring the impact of the placement has sought to establish quantitative relationships between students who undertake a placement and their subsequent academic performance. This small-scale research project is an anti-positivist, qualitative research inquiry employing elements of the transcendental phenomenological approach originating from Husserl (1859-1938) to uncover the essences of student experiences during their gap year. Rather than seeking to *interpret* the experiences of the students involved, the research aims to provide a description which accurately portrays how students experience their gap year from *their point of view* (Denscombe, 2007).

Four semi-structured one-to-one interviews were conducted with gap year students, transcribed and analysed in order to understand what these students were engaged in during their gap year and the implications of this for their approach to the final year of their degree. A phenomenological analysis following Moustakas (1994) was adopted and eight themes emerged: an inability to articulate 'skills'; a sense of growing up/maturing; increased motivation; greater focus and discipline; difficulty associated with the working environment; wanting to get a 'good' degree; and development of thinking. Overall the findings indicate that similar improvements to academic practices are found by students who have had a gap year to those previously reported from students who have undertaken a placement.

**Key words:** Placement, qualitative research, phenomenology, work experience, accounting education.

### **Research paper (4,851 words):**

The current concern within Higher Education (HE) with graduate employability has focused interest on the placement and other forms of work experience. There is a growing body of research that points to the fact that undertaking a placement is not only significant in terms of employability but also in terms of ultimate academic performance (*vide* Mandilaras, 2004; Gomez *et al.*, 2004; Rawlings *et al.*, 2005; Mendez, 2008; Bullock *et al.*, 2009; SurrIDGE, 2009; Driffield *et al.*, 2011; Patel *et al.*, 2012). Research concerned with the relationship between placement and academic performance has overwhelmingly adopted a quantitative approach and sought to establish a causal link between participation on placement (or not) and improved academic performance, by looking either at the final examination performance of placement versus non-placement students, or the 'distance travelled' (i.e. the difference between second year and final year results) for these two distinct cohorts of students. However adopting quantitative techniques to establish causal relationships between variables does nothing to illuminate *why* these results are found. Indeed the adoption of quantitative techniques to explore the relationship between placement and academic results necessitates treating students as objects in complex statistical formulas where all uniqueness of these individual students is lost. The ontological position adopted in this research draws upon the phenomenological tradition, where my interest in the relationship between a period of work experience and academic performance lies in seeing this from the eyes of the students involved. A small number of qualitative studies are relevant to my research and are summarised below.

Little and Harvey (2006) interviewed a total of 82 placement students from a range of disciplines, in a study designed to investigate students' perceptions of learning from placements and the extent to which they transfer and build on such learning in subsequent stages of their degree. The analysis of interviews identified three broad clusters of skills that students discussed (*ibid*: 29); 'interpersonal' (consisting of the

particular skills of oral and/or written communication, networking, reporting to senior management, liaising with clients, and telephone and e-mail protocols; 'personal' (confidence, personal organisation, time management, adaptability, flexibility and maturity); and 'intellectual' (subject knowledge, confidence with subject matter, project management, and to a lesser extent analysis and synthesis). The authors found that students tended to emphasise the development of their confidence and interpersonal skills, their organisation and time-management rather than their intellectual development (ibid: 45).

Similar findings within the accountancy and finance area were found by Lucas and Tan (2009) who undertook semi-structured interviews with 17 students in order to illuminate the nature and development of students' reflective capacity during placement. In common with the findings of Little and Harvey (2006), students in Lucas and Tang's (2009) study did not articulate changes in what Lucas and Tang describe as "the cognitive aspect" (ibid: 41) associated with developing "an independent way of knowing" (ibid: 41). Lucas and Tang (2009: 12) concluded that improvement in academic performance by placement students in their final year seems to arise from a "developing sense of self that leads to a more focused application towards their learning. There was a strong motivation to achieve a good degree and consequently students organised their own learning so as to closely meet assessment requirements".

Finally, Surridge (2011) undertook 16 semi-structured interviews with business and accounting students where the focus of questions was on the role of work placement and university in developing students' self-efficacy beliefs. The research takes self-efficacy from the work of Bandura (1997) but defines self-efficacy "colloquially as 'confidence'" (Surridge, 2011: 4). Surridge concludes that placement develops self-regulatory skills (such as planning, organising, self-management, taking responsibility and working

independently) better than university. The self-efficacy beliefs (confidence) in these particular skills, are also developed more on placement than at university, and the placement “represents a transforming experience for the students, raising their general self-efficacy beliefs (general self-confidence)” (ibid: 1). In common with Little and Harvey (2006) and Lucas and Tang (2009), placement students commonly talked about the way in which the routine and discipline of a 9-5 day job affected their approach to the final year in terms of increased motivation to study.

What has been assumed in these studies is that it is the placement experience itself, the structured university approved work experience that has resulted in the reported findings. As far as I have been able to establish, no previous research has investigated whether similar articulated benefits of placement work experience are also articulated by students who have not undertaken a subject-specific university approved placement but had a gap year in their studies. My research addresses the paucity of research that investigates the relationship between work experience and subsequent university study through the eyes of the students themselves, moreover its unique contribution to knowledge in the field is through its illumination of the opinion of a previously un-researched group of students (gap year) rather than on the more commonly researched placement students. The findings from this research will be of use to those with an interest in the relationship between academic performance and work experience, and will also have significant implications for professional practice. For instance, the conclusions of the research could impact on policy decisions concerning approving work experience, or in terms of decisions regarding students’ transfer between full-time and sandwich route programmes.

## ***Methodology***

Given that my research seeks to understand the nature of things from the perceivers' point of view, I consider that the most appropriate way to achieve this is through undertaking in-depth interviews with students; a technique commonly associated with the phenomenological tradition (Bogan and Taylor, 1975). There were 28 accountancy and finance students in their final year who had undertaken a gap year. I gained access to eight of these students through attending a specific teaching session where I distributed a short questionnaire seeking their views on what they did during their year out, their reasons for choosing the sandwich (rather than full-time) route, and why they thought they ended up without a placement. The purpose of the questionnaire was to gain some initial information about the student sample, but importantly, the questionnaire asked students whether they would be interested in "helping me further by undertaking a short one-to-one interview". Four students indicated their willingness to take part and were subsequently interviewed, thus students self-selected to the study.

Arksey and Knight (2007: 58) highlight that there may be differences between people who volunteer for research and those who do not, suggesting that "volunteering might make them the minority in the group in which you are interested". The potential for 'unrepresentative' views being offered by those who have self-selected is not considered to be an issue for my research since my concern is with gaining in-depth description from a small number of students in order to understand the research phenomenon fully, rather than seeking theory that can be generalised from my sample to a wider population. The fact that students have volunteered their time freely rather than being encouraged to take part, I feel is advantageous in terms of the potential for generating rich and interesting data.

All interviewees signed an informed consent form prior to the interview taking place and interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed in full. The table below indicates the age and sex of the interviewees as well as a brief description of what each participant did during their gap year, and a reference by which they can be identified in the analysis.

*Table 1: Summary of interview participants' activities during gap year*

<b>Participant reference</b>	<b>Sex and age</b>	<b>Summary of gap year activities</b>
R	M, 21	Worked at a local City Council within the finance section on a voluntary basis for six months and also undertook some voluntary work at his Temple.
M	M, 22	Worked as a banking advisor for the full 12 month period (in a sales rather than accounting/finance position). Continued this work on a part time basis into the final year.
P	F, 22	Worked for the full 12 months at a local financial institution (but not at an appropriate level for it to be approved by the university).
S	M, 23	Raised funds to go travelling to Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia and Nepal for six months, working in each country (teaching) for a number of weeks.

A phenomenological approach to analysis that follows Moustakas (1994) was adopted. Moustakas (1994: 103) sets out "methods and procedures" for conducting phenomenological analysis, in which he suggests that all written transcripts are read several times to obtain an overall feeling for them, then, from each transcript, significant phrases or sentences are identified and meanings created which can be clustered into themes.

## ***Analysis and discussion***

There were eight key themes identified through the analysis which are discussed below:

### *Theme 1: Inability to articulate 'skills'*

Much of the literature promoting the undergraduate sandwich placement does so from a 'skills' perspective, which is often tied into discourses within education on employability and graduate attributes. In essence the thinking is that employers are looking for graduates to display certain generic skills, and periods of supervised work experience are a good means of equipping students with these skills. What emerged from my interviews was that students within this small sample did not find it easy to articulate what these skills were. An example is provided by S who stated;

There was quite a few skills, I don't know how I could say I could put it all into one. This is the first time I've actually thought about it properly, but I do feel that everything I did there helped me a lot, with everything I'm going to do now and into the future.

It was in the area of communication that students *were* able to articulate an improvement in skill. M refers to learning "how to talk to people on different levels", and S comments that communication was "a big thing that I wasn't really that good with before. I just used to do what I want and say what I want which was bad." He acknowledges that "meeting people from all over the world" helped his communication skills. R also discusses the ways in which his communication skills improved during the year; "Communication wise you have to like adapt to like your surroundings and kind of sus people out and tailor your communication style to what they want and stuff... It was a new experience just talking with a lot more mature people who have been through a lot more life experience than yourself".



While P did not specifically mention communication as an area she felt she improved in, the following extract is taken from her reply to the open question “in what ways do you think you have changed as a result of the year?”, and demonstrates an increased awareness of how she is expected to behave within the workplace, including the ways she should communicate with others. It also illustrates another theme to emerge from the interviews – that of growing up/maturing, which is turned to next.

I became more mature I guess. A little bit. I went from uni and I was just thrown straight into that environment and that was quite – that was a big change. You have to watch what you say, you have to really formal about everything so. University you chill back, you say whatever you want, you relax and then you’re just put in that environment and you’re like, I’ve got to be mature here. I have to be quite quiet, I’ve got to watch what I do and say. So that was a bit crazy. But I think it helped me. It did help me develop as a person. And I thought, wow, this is what the rest of my life is going to be like. So it was a bit, woe, a bit of a shock. So it did mature me a bit. I thought, this is what I need to do. It helped me just kind of develop a little bit and realise what I need to do before I start working.

### *Theme 2: Growing up/maturing*

Growing up and maturing during the year was raised by a number of the students interviewed. Related to the fact that they considered they had grown up themselves, was the fact that the workplace allowed them opportunities to be around other people who were more ‘grown up’ than them. This is illustrated within the extract above from R concerning his communication skills, and in the extracts below;

I think some of the skills as well that you gained through just growing up really round the work place, actually to work with people who are a lot more career minded and you go back to university and you kind of, you just kind of grow up a little bit and focus that little bit more and you probably wouldn’t have done that in the first and second years. (M)

they’re all a lot older than me I think, whoever you’re with you end up being a bit more like them and learning some of their characteristics (P)

it doesn't matter what placement you do it does help cause you'll have that bit extra confidence to go out and source information because you'll have been in the workplace for so long, talking about stuff in general discussion or presentations or whatever it is (M)

### *Theme 3: Increased motivation*

A common theme identified from each interview was the recognition that students returned to university more motivated in their final year. This increased motivation was specifically directed towards studying as illustrated in the following extracts;

Coming back I did have the motivation – it was so fresh as well, and I started studying straight away. It was quite hard, getting back into education mode again from being across the world and stuff, but it worked straight away, and I was getting high 60s and firsts all the time. (S)

When I got here I was like, yeah I'm ready to work, I can do this, I got right back into it, whereas if I'd just been in second year and then gone into third year, I'd have been oh this is a repeat, I don't think I would have been so determined to do it. So I did have a little break and it made me a bit more focussed, I was like, I've had a break, I can do it. (P)

The reasons expressed to account for this increased motivation were different, for instance, for S who had travelled, it was described "cause I saw the struggles going on in those countries, and I saw the fact that they take education so seriously and we take it for granted". This is quite a 'profound' observation to make, to recognise the value that education now held given what he had observed overseas. Other examples of the extent to which this student's unique experiences impacted on him are provided later in this commentary.

For others, such as the example taken from P above, increased motivation seems to have come about due to having had some time away from the university engaged in a

different activity. The repetition of "I can do this/it" within P's extract above I think illustrates the strength of feeling this student has in her abilities returning to study.

When pressed further as to whether students would be similarly motivated had they not had a gap year, they unanimously thought that would not be the case. Clearly they considered that it was their period of absence from university that had resulted in their increased motivation on return.

Mandilaras (2004) speculated that the increased motivation and focussed attitude of placement students could explain their better academic performance, and Little and Harvey (2006), Lucas and Tang (2009), and Surridge (2011), all refer to the increased motivation of placement students in their interview studies. This increased motivation was found in previous studies to lead to a "more focused application towards learning" (to borrow from Lucas and Tang, 2009: 12), which was also a common theme from my interviews.

#### *Theme 4: Focus/discipline/routine*

Students articulated the ways in which the routine and structure of their work experiences impacted on their approach to the final year as the following extracts illustrate;

It was the routine of the 9-5 that helped me with this year definitely. I think in first year and second year, morning lectures I was just, can't be bothered to go, I'll read the slides, but I went to everything this year. I was in a routine. It's there for a reason, I should just do it. So it made me a bit more disciplined and go to my lectures and seminars. (P)

In my first two years it was kind of just, kind of, yeah whatever, this is uni, but when I came back I had my mind set like I knew I didn't do as well second year but kind of

said look this is what I'm going to do, like have a schedule, you revise on this day you take a break, just balance it out a bit better and stuff. (R)

This application of discipline to the final year was not just a "work mode" (M) resulting from being engaged in full time employment, since similar ideas were expressed by S who had gone travelling;

like before I used to be like cram it all in at the end, but this year I was much more on the ball...so I'd be organised straight away, I knew what books I needed to get and what additional reading I needed to do. (S)

The routine and discipline of these gap year students is contrasted to the full-time route, or full-time colleagues. For instance P referred to being more "laid back" and "relaxed" about the final year had she not had the gap year. In referring to full-time students, S described them as "more chilled out" and "not really that bothered". M refers to having his 'head in the clouds' if he hadn't had his gap year in the extract below;

I wouldn't have had that focus, [if hadn't had gap year] I would have probably been a bit more head in the clouds on how easy it is to get jobs, or how hard it is, and I would have thought I'd just fall into one, I'll just make a few applications, and it's just not like that at all, it's not like that. (M)

As with Little and Harvey (2006) and Lucas and Tang (2009), since no full-time final year students were also interviewed, it cannot be said whether similar findings would be articulated in this case. Clearly the increased significance of the final year academic mark (in my university, in common with many, the final year accounts for 75% of the overall mark), may have contributed towards *all* students applying a more focussed approach to their work in the final year. However, for the students interviewed, they each expressed that they would not have felt so motivated to work hard had they gone straight to the final year. In common with Surridge (2011) for instance, having a 9am-5pm routine at work was specifically commented upon (which clearly resulted from the *work* experience). However, my results are significant in demonstrating that similar

articulations concerning a more focussed approach to work were also expressed by a student who had been travelling in his gap year rather than in full-time employment.

*Theme 5: Difficulty associated with the working environment*

The repetition in the above extract seems to emphasise how surprised this student was with the difficulty he experienced in gaining employment, and this was a common theme within students' accounts. R recalls his struggles with making applications for (placement) jobs;

I made so many applications it was just unbelievable, maybe a hundred applications  
...Between 5 and 10 I'd got to the later stages and I was just like what is happening and  
my Mum even says, she says [R] it's not your fault, like, don't worry. (R)

M recalls seeing lawyers "with ten years of experience" applying for junior banking positions within the company he was working. He recounts "they were in their 30s and I was just, I really do feel for you guys cause I know how hard it is. You're doing nothing related to your career, you don't want to do that job, that's just how hard it is now". P recounts "if I want to get a good job I've got to work hard, I've got to put in my hours".

The *difficulty associated with the working environment* has not been identified as a theme in previous literature. This may be due to the fact that the previous qualitative studies referred to (Little and Harvey, 2006, Lucas and Tang, 2009, SurrIDGE, 2011) have had a specific *focus* for their research (more around the articulated skills and learning of placement students), rather than adopting a phenomenological approach that allows themes to show themselves and emerge from the interviews in the way I have. Pragmatically it is also pertinent to note that the historical timing of my interviews, following a prolonged recession, is likely to have resulted in the emergence of this theme and it is quite possible that should the research be repeated when the economy and labour market are more buoyant, this theme may not emerge.

### *Theme 6: Wanting to get a 'good' degree*

In common with Lucas and Tang (2009) gap year students expressed their desire to do well academically, for instance P stated "I think it has made me more determined to do well in my exams this year". Doing well was determined by getting an upper second or first degree classification; "If you don't get a good grade, if you don't get a 2:1 or a 1<sup>st</sup> you're not going to be able to get jobs" (P). The continual repetition of 2:1 within the following extract demonstrates just how important this degree classification is to M;

I don't want to not get a 2:1 at the end of this year, otherwise you've just wasted my time. A complete waste of three years and money etc so I've got to get a 2:1. Just to get my foot in the door I have to have a 2:1 just to speak to them so there's no way I was going to, touch wood, not get a 2:1. Hopefully I'll get a 2:1 so. If I don't then it's like what have I done for three years, it's not going to reflect [*pause*] I feel as though I should get a 2:1, I think I deserve it, it's just a bit of luck I suppose at the end of the day.

Rather than seeing the degree programme as an opportunity for learning and development, as a *process*, the small sample of students spoken with, are very focussed on the end result, the *product*, in terms of degree classification output. Related to this, it was surprising to hear many students refer to 'getting the degree over with' in their accounts, as the following passages demonstrate;

Sometimes I do wish that I had just carried on because then I would have had my university degree done by then and by this year I would have been in employment. (S)

If you can't get that job then you'd want to get your degree over with...you want to get it over with cause that's why you're there. (S)

But in some respects I kind of wish I did it [full time route] just to get the degree over and done with so I can concentrate on work full time... just get uni out the way and do it (M)

You just wanted to finish it over and done with. (R)

### *Theme 7: Benefits of the gap year/comparison to placement*

The penultimate theme has been described as *benefits of the gap year/comparison to placement* and as such sums up the essence of the research aim for my study. Both R and M talked about how the experiences of the gap year directly helped them to complete a dissertation module on the final year (which involved primary research). S talked about how he "brought in so many examples from my year out" to an exam in Accounting and Accountability. Students' articulations of their maturing/growing up and also of being more focussed and disciplined within their study were always attributed to the year off rather than being something that they felt would have come about anyway. It seems therefore that perhaps it is the immersion in practice in its various contexts that is important, and the exact form the practice takes is of less importance. This point is discussed further in considering the final theme, *development of thinking*.

### *Theme 8: Development in thinking*

The final theme gathers together those examples provided by students that illustrate how their thinking seems to have changed as a result of the gap year. By far the most extensive examples of this were provided by the student who went travelling, S, as the extracts below illustrate;

This degree that we're studying, Business degrees, and going into the financial world, they kind of brain wash you into a corporate mechanism, where you're only told to think in one way. So for me going out and looking at it in a different way, and coming back, it allowed me to be a lot more critical. And just looking at things from different aspects. You just look at things so much more differently than just what a teacher wants you to look at. Those are part of being critical, evaluative, being able to synthesise, analysis and all those.

I started looking at my subject from an outside perspective instead of just what they are teaching us.

I see things from different perspectives now. Just generally, like even when I see a story in the news, I don't see it from the way they see it, I try to see what's not there, why have they put that in the paper?, being a lot more critical.

Like I said it opens your mind to thinking differently and be critical and bringing different perspectives – it [gap year] did really help.

it was more I wanted to do well, not just so I'll come out and get a good job, it was more, I wanted to do well for myself and my family, I dunno, to be a better person in a way.

These comments appear to demonstrate that the student found his gap year something of a transformational experience in a similar way to that found by SurrIDGE (2011) for placement students. This is in contrast to Little and Harvey (2006) who identified a lack of articulation of what they termed intellectual development, particularly in the areas of analysis and synthesis, and similarly Lucas and Tang (2009) concluded that the students they interviewed had not developed in what they termed 'the cognitive aspect'.

While the students who had been in employment provided less comprehensive examples demonstrating a change in thinking, references were made to "changing my attitude" (P), and being "more open minded" (M) and (R). It appears that immersion in practice may have gone some way to moving students away from the notion that the teacher provides all the answers, as demonstrated in the following quotation;

I'm more open minded, seeing things differently than I was before. You only have one point of view and when you go into the workplace you actually see the broader picture of everything, like you take into account so many other things (R).

## **Conclusion**

As far as I have been able to establish, my research is the first to consider the views of gap year, rather than placement students. Through undertaking a small number of



semi-structured interviews with gap year students, I have adopted a phenomenological approach that let themes emerge from the transcriptions. I found that although the prevalent discourses around work experience within HE are often framed in terms of skill development, with the exception of communication, skills were not easily articulated by students within my sample. Students did however, routinely refer to their gap year making them more motivated on return to university. This motivation manifested itself in a more focussed and disciplined attitude towards studying and students commonly referred to the routine established in work being applied to university. The small sample of students interviewed were particularly focused and motivated towards obtaining a 'good' degree classification. In all of these themes, the findings from my interviews accord with the findings of other researchers who have interviewed *placement* students. In this way, similar articulated benefits were expressed by gap year students to those previously reported as attributed to placement students. This finding has implications for practice within the field of placement and work experience, since it suggests that it is the engagement with workplace practice in its various forms that is important to students' development, rather than the specific, structured, university approved programmes of experience that we as educators provide.

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