Doing it Differently: re-designing the curriculum to face the challenges of student work-based learning opportunities

Abstract

Purpose Work-based learning is increasingly viewed as important in students' higher education experiences. Drawing from the process of re-validating a Joint Honours in Education (JHE) programme, we highlight challenges involved in ensuring a meaningful placement experience for students that is fully embedded within their course. Primary challenges included the disparate number of subject strand combinations and concomitant career aspirations, wider university requisites on developing Graduate Attributes and student expectations of their placement opportunities. In broadening the scope and number of placement opportunities, we simultaneously increased our partnership links with employers to attract increased student buy-in to the opportunities available to them.

Design/methodology/approach This case study utilises staff reflections, stakeholder contributions and student evaluations to illuminate the process involved in re-validating a JHE programme to incorporate increased placement opportunities. A particular focus is placed on consideration of the tensions inherent within work based learning opportunities and the ways in which such experiences can be successfully embedded within a Higher Education (HE) degree programme. Whilst we are able to report on successful integration of placement opportunities in Year 1, we utilise student perspectives to gain understanding of the importance, or otherwise, they place on placements through the duration of their degree.

Findings Whilst placements are widely accepted as a positive feature of HE, inherent tensions emerged from some students who questioned the value and purpose of placements and time away from university. Conversely, employers saw placement and particularly the assessment of students whilst on placement as critical in students' development into professional workers. The inclusion of placements in HE is therefore problematic, particularly in light of increased tuition fees. This case study however, suggests that meaningful and disparate placement opportunities can be successfully embedded within each year of an HE degree programme and can be viewed as enhancing the student academic experience.

Research limitations/implications The paper is located within a body of research that focuses positively on placement/work-based learning opportunities for undergraduate students, but does raise some emerging tensions linked to the marketization of HE and resulting student perspectives on 'value'. Although generic themes can be applied to curriculum design elsewhere, outcomes may be different and linked to differing institutional habituses that influence practice. In addition, this paper reports solely on a single case that has

developed a degree course to support the unique needs of its students within a particular context.

Practical implications: The work-based learning model presented here facilitates student empowerment in tailoring their degree to their interests and career aspirations. It requires effective internal and external partnerships to inform curriculum design and the organization of placements. This paper will therefore be of interest to HE practitioners who are faced with the challenges of providing a broad range of placement opportunities for large and diverse groups of students with differing career aspirations. In addition, it will also be attractive to employers that have strong links with universities and are in the position to influence curriculum design.

Social implications: The focus on employability and the development of key generic skills is interconnected with structures influencing social mobility. The range of students entering higher education and the concomitant expectations on their degree to have 'value' in the employment 'market' on graduation is becoming increasingly important – particularly for students categorized as widening participation. Offering increased opportunities for placements and linking assessment to work-based competencies can therefore be viewed as an integral part of HE's responsibilities to students.

Originality/value: This case study highlights the versatility of work-based learning that on one hand, requires the academy to embrace alternatives ways of learning, but on the other hand, creates new and innovative ways of engaging students. In addition and critically, it illuminates an approach to embedding work-based learning into an overarching degree structure that enables students to tailor their degree to their interests and career aspirations.

Keywords Curriculum design, employability, placements, work-based learning, Higher Education.

Paper type: Case Study

Introduction

The integration of work based learning opportunities within undergraduate courses is indicative of the interconnection between higher education, Government policy and economic and social structures (Boud, Solomon and Symes, 2001). With concern being raised about the employability of graduates, work-based learning in the form of placement and placement-related activity is fast becoming an established and expected part of the undergraduate student experience (Foster and Stephenson 1998). However, the broadening of student participation in placement and placement-related activities brings with it particular challenges, namely the: quality of the placement experience; rationalisation of embedding placement experiences into undergraduate courses in the context of fee paying students; reluctance of some employers to engage with placements. In addition, with growing placement activity brought about by larger student numbers, the tensions identified in previous research (see Lester

and Costley 2010) between creating ample but equitable opportunities for students and maintaining academic credibility at the level of content and assessment are likely to intensify. This paper explores these issues in the context of a Joint Honours in Education suite of courses that attract high numbers of students and facilitates a number of different degree pathways. In drawing from our experiences of revalidating the courses to meet student, institution and employer expectations, we illuminate the on-going challenges in preparing students for a saturated graduate employment market where the need for 'positional advantage' (Waters and Brooks, 2013) is an implicit given.

Attitudes towards the integration of work-based learning opportunities within degree courses are varied with some believing it is the responsibility of students to prepare themselves for and to find employment as highlighted by Herbert and Rothwell (2005: 16):

> Placements now take many different forms and the term itself can be somewhat misleading … whilst many institutions facilitate the contact of students and employers, to a greater or lesser extent most take the view that it is the student's own responsibility to locate and secure employment, as it provides good experience for after university.

Including placement opportunities also creates ideological tensions where the purpose of the experience can serve differing objectives as illustrated by Hardwick (2010):

> Within universities, work placements frequently take two forms: either learning *for* work, common in professional courses, or learning *through* work, associated with experiential learning.
>
> (Hardwick, 2012:3)

More fundamentally, students' views of university as a commodity in serving their self-interests in the pursuit of a career, leads to a shift in emphasis where HE has increased 'commercial relevance': a position that is 'anathema to the values of the academy' (Miller, 2010: 199). However, the integration of placements in HE provision is unlikely to disappear and as Dalrymple, Kemp and Smith argue,

> [w]ith the increasing prevalence of WBL programmes in higher education, there is a demonstrable need to evolve new pedagogic models to support facilitators and participants in conceptualising and developing practice.
>
> (Dalrymple, Kemp and Smith, 2012:3).

Historically, student perspectives on core modules within the JHE were frequently reported as negative parts of their course with the following statements coming out of course evaluations:

> *Did not enjoy professional studies in the first year.*
>
> *Not sure of the point of Professional Studies – didn't help much at all in the first year.*
> *Professional Studies 1 – did not find very useful as it seemed most of them were just filling time.*
> *Professional Studies modules seem to be completely irrelevant and a waste of time.*
> *Professional Studies 1, 2 and 3 were all poor. No real gain from any session.*
> *The placement [Professional Studies 2] was the only positive.*
>
> (Student Course Evaluations June 2013)

It is within this complexity of competing views and expectations that a curriculum design was framed. In setting about revalidating the JHE, the following questions became a focus for the developments:

- How do we create a set of core modules that are meaningful to students?
- What can we include to enhance the offer to undergraduates?
- How can we link with internal and external partners?

This case study addresses the above questions through the process of curriculum design and will therefore be of interest to practitioners who are faced with the challenges of providing realistic, relevant and rigorous placement opportunities for large but diverse groups of students. In short, we present a model for work-based learning in which students can individually tailor the amount of placement and placement-related activities within their degree.

Initial Considerations

A wide body of research surrounding student aspirations, particularly students from disadvantaged backgrounds, confirms that obtaining a degree is part of a wider concern connected with social mobility (see for example, Brown, Reay and Vincent, 2013; Byrom and Lightfoot, 2013; Reay, 2013). Coupled with the institutional demands that place expectations on provision to produce graduates ready for the world of work on completion of their degree, any revalidation of the suite of courses was located within a range of competing and complimentary demands and expectations as outlined above. Framed by a series of 'Graduate Attributes' that essentially contribute to the construction of an ideal graduate identity and other structural constraints, there is limited room for manoeuvre in course design. Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) caution against a tight focus on graduate attributes which 'cannot be something that is merely a series of attributes that can be enumerated and ticked off' (564). Therefore whilst mindful of the desired end result from both a student and institutional perspective, much of our consideration of what should feature in the courses extended beyond this to examine how the educational offer could best support students in their personal higher education journeys. To contextualize the developments made, we first begin by providing some historical information.

Context and Background

The Joint Honours in Education has been running for a number of years with thirteen differing degree titles available from differing permutations of the following subject strands: Education Studies, Early Years, Special and Inclusive Education, Sports Education, Psychology and Business. In addition to the subject

strands, students follow core modules (named Professional Studies in the previous programme) which are essentially the space where the teaching of generic skills is positioned. Figure 1 illustrates the old course design:

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
40 credits	Subject strand 1		Subject strand 1
40 credits	Subject strand 2		Subject strand 2
40 credits	Professional studies	Professional studies	Professional studies
20 credits		Subject strand 1	
20 credits		Subject strand 1	
20 credits		Subject strand 2	
20 credits		Subject strand 2	

Figure 1: Pre-Revalidation Course Structure

A periphery function of the Professional Studies strand was to create sense of belonging amongst a diverse range of students, but also a pedagogic space within which generic skills could be developed e.g. academic skills, personal and professional development and research skills. To achieve this, in the first year, an academic skills module that required students to hone their skills in professional areas of their choosing tackled issues around transition and introduced the notion of employability. In the second year, a dedicated placement module was merged with a research methods module so that students could undertake their own primary research whilst on placement. In the third year, a traditional dissertation module allowed students to culminate their research experience in one of the two disciplines they combined.

In 2012 and 2013, the course offer was reviewed as part of a revalidation process. A core group was identified from across the teaching team and the administrative support team. The core group consulted local employers with an existing involvement in placements, current students in order to include 'student voice', and marketing personnel in order to meet the perceived demands of incoming students. Mindful that Professional Studies received much criticism in course evaluations, this aspect of the provision came under significant scrutiny as we moved through the validation process.

It was important to the core group that all students from across the JHE came together at certain points in the degree to maintain a sense of belonging. However, a number of disgruntles had emerged relating to the professional studies strand. They were:

- The label of 'professional studies' was misleading and some students erroneously interpreted this as a third discipline that they were studying

- The isolation of academic skills as part of the degree programme were often perceived negatively by students, echoing a wider push to integrate and embed study skills modules (Wingate 2006)
- The research methods element within the placement module, although generating the opportunity for students to conduct their own field research in a real life context, remained relatively generic and lacked subject specific input that was deemed critical in preparation for year three
- Although the placement experience was positively experienced by most students it also highlighted for some that their career aspirations did not live up to their expectations. In these cases, students became aware of what they did not want to do, but were still unaware of what they might want to do
- Placement providers felt restricted by the stipulation of a six week placement period. For some this time frame was overly compressed, and in some cases meant that although they would have liked to offer a placement to a student, felt unable to because of an inability to support and structure a student's experience within a prescribed period of time.
- With larger student cohorts enrolling onto the course, placements were becoming increasingly difficult for some students to secure.

Taking these points into consideration, the following changes were made to the shape of the JHE during the revalidation process:

- The JHE maintained a 40 credit point module centred on personal and professional development.
- In Year 1 placement opportunities and placement related activities are available for students to opt in to
- An additional 0 credit 'Transition into HE' module was constructed to support students coming into HE
- In Year 2 the research methods module was disconnected from the placement module. This allowed greater flexibility for the delivery of the placement module that now has 10 weeks rather than 6 weeks put aside for Year 2 placements
- Students unable to secure a placement in year 2, for whatever reason, will now be able to take a 'taught' placement module instead of a 'field' placement module
- Year 3 students can either opt to take a traditional dissertation module, or can they can opt to do a second placement and conduct primary research on-site as part of this module

Following revalidation, the course structure was as follows:

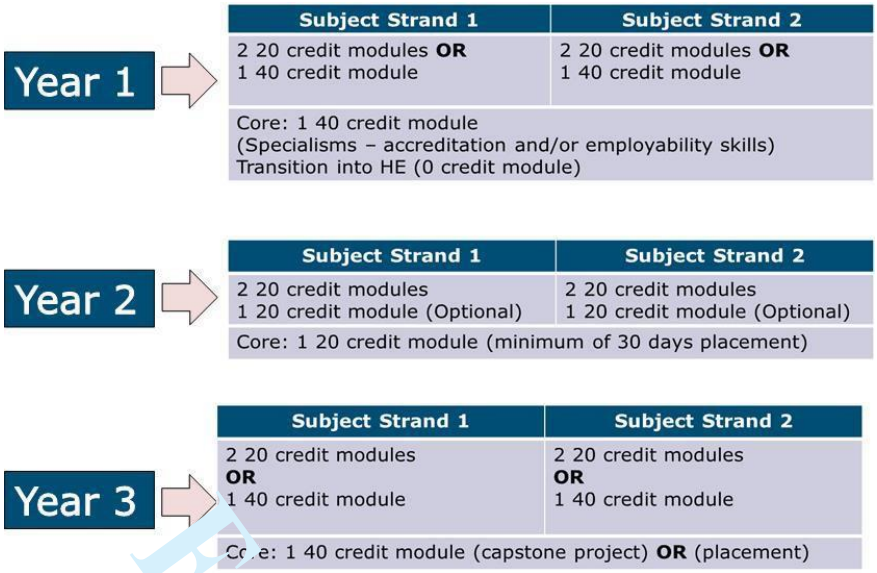

Figure 1: Post-Revalidation Course Structure

In Year 1 students can pick up a number of 'specialisms' that relate to their subject strand or broaden their experiences by taking them away from their specific area of interest and expertise. Specialisms include: Makaton; counselling; volunteering in the community; Certificate in Education and Training; Level 1 coaching awards; mini-placements in education settings. The specialisms were designed students with the opportunity to gain additional qualifications as the majority are externally accredited by awarding bodies.

In essence, the new revalidated JHE allows students to ramp up or ramp down the amount of placement and placement related activity that they get involved in. It is therefore responsive to the diverse and individual needs of students and recognizes that these needs are subject to change through each year that they are on the degree course. For example, one student who may not be interested in pursuing placement opportunities in the first year might feel more at ease with it in their second year and could easily find that the third year offers them a final opportunity to engage with work-based learning. The course team felt that this was a particularly attractive offer for students who had amended their career aspirations based on their Year 2 placement experiences. The structure also enables students to take advantage of the placement activities on offer in the first and second year to build a repertoire of employment based skills and then to choose a more traditional pathway by opting for the dissertation module in the third year.

The next section will look at the theoretical underpinning to the new course design before profiling in more detail how placement and placement related activities are offered to students on a sliding scale of engagement. The latter section then, will deal explicitly with years one, two and three, with a focus on how and why mandatory and non-mandatory placement and placement-implicit modules were designed.

Work-based Learning

Placements as a key mechanism for the delivery of work-based learning (WBL) are fast becoming an anticipated element of Higher Education study and therefore increasingly seen as a ''normal' component of the university' (Boud and Solomon 2001: 19). As a result placements and WBL are now commonly viewed as 'accepted as comparable but nevertheless different from the traditional on-campus one' (Chisholm, Harris, Northwood and Johrendt 2009: 319). This has dictated 'a disturbance of our understanding of the role and function of higher education' (Boud and Solomon 2001: 19) as well as fears relating to the potential lowering of standards (Boud and Solomon 2001). From a practitioner perspective, this means that the design of degree courses offering work-based learning as modular study should be accompanied by a robust rationale based upon a clear understanding of what WBL is, the nature of the learning generated from it and the types of assessment equipped to capture it.

Pinning down an exact definition of work-based learning (WBL) has developed with complexity over the last couple of decades (Hager 2011). The first emerging definitions of work-based learning were arguably simplistic (Chisholm, Harris, Northwood and Johrendt 2009), usually in reference to the unpredictable yet contextualised nature of learning in a place of work (Dalrymple, Kemp and Smith 2014). However, a more nuanced way of expressing the nature of WBL is offered as 'a class of university programmes that bring together universities and work organizations to create new learning opportunities in workplaces' (Boud, Solomon and Symes 2001: 4), thus stressing the relationship as a partnership between the academy and the work organization. This way of understanding WBL can be recognized as a 'dialogic approach' (Dalrymple, Kemp and Smith 2014) in the sense that it is based upon a partnership model generated out of the relationship between the academy and work organization.

However, more recent understandings of WBL foreground the role of the student in the relationships that develop during WBL and thereby can be seen as a shift from viewing WBL as a dialogic partnership involving institution (University) and organization (employer) to that of a more symbiotic or triadic one between student, institution and organization (Dalrymple, Kemp and Smith 2014).

Another approach has been to privilege the needs of the employer in a way that accords with the triadic partnership by maintaining also the needs of the student and institution. In this method, known as the 'employer responsive provision' (ERP), there is 'a shift away from the learner centred approach and the traditional relationship between HEIs and work-based leaners…to one where the employer drives the learning design, mapped to the needs of the organisation' (White 2012: 8). The student is still the central component but the needs of the employer are elevated to help form more of an even playing field between HEI and the work organization.

Another evolving view of WBL, is that it need not be restricted to the workplace. Just like the concept of 'work', it is not limited to a process that happens only within the strict parameters of a workplace. It might just as easily occur in the wider community, at home or as part of an educational course of study. In this

view, WBL is mobilised across a range of contexts and construed subsequently as 'associated with work wherever or why ever it is done' (Chisholm, Harris, Northwood and Johrendt 2009: 320).

The learning process that is undertaken during a period of WBL is frequently understood as one of an experiential nature, or 'experience-related knowledge' (Chisholm, Harris, Northwood and Johrendt 2009: 325). However, this understanding can be construed as self-limiting because simply being at work does not automatically equate to *learning* at work. The work of Schön (1983) demonstrates that a critical element to experiential learning is reflection, or in Schön's words 'reflection-in-action' (1983: 132). Central to this type of reflection, heralded as a critical part of professional practice, is being able to make sense of such reflections in ways that informs future action. The practice of thinking reflectively is modeled in a cyclical motion by (amongst others) Kolb in 1984 and later by Gibbs in 1988. The cyclical model that is employed to help capture the reflective nature of experiential learning is not accidental. The infinite nature of a circle captures the ongoing and iterative nature of reflective and experiential learning (Moon 1999). That is, much of the reflection inherent in experiential learning is ongoing and developmental.

With the learning process seen as experiential, reflective and iterative, assessment methods used to support WBL most likely are to mirror the process. This means departing from the conventional Higher Education discourse of the academy's ' 'unilateral control' (Boud and Soloman 2001: 21) and embracing the triadic partnership models that allows space for the needs of the organization and the personal and individual development of the student. This means a more open-ended approach to learning whereby 'work is the curriculum' (Boud, Soloman and Symes 2001: 5). But it also requires a holistic sense of individual competency development, or in other words, 'the generation of relevant functionality, sensitivity and sociality' (Illeris 2011: 41).

What do we see as a workable definition of WBL in the new JHE?

The new JHE degree structure contains numerous placement and placement-implicit modules. The influence for these can be understood as a fusion of triadic learning and ERP. The triadic learning approach to work-based learning is relevant to the JHE placement and placement implicit modules because the approach is, broadly speaking, not academy based but academy aligned (Dalrymple, Kemp and Smith 2014) with the aim of achieving 'an interactive pedagogy with mutual benefits for all involved' (Dalrymple, Kemp and Smith 2014: 87). ERP has resonance with the design of the course because the placement strategies put in place are done so in part to support the multidisciplinary nature of the JHE and to support the diverse body of students the JHE attracts.

The development of the new JHE has also been highly influenced by the notion of 'employability'. The term 'employability' is not necessarily an easy one to pin down. From a university perspective, 'employability' is often expressed in terms of a list of individual skills or attributes that a person possesses in order to make

them attractive to employers. However, at the level of pedagogy, there is a proviso attached to this that one might understand as 'preparedness' or 'job-ready', or as Andrews and Russell (2012: 35) articulated: 'a "can-do" approach, a readiness to take part and contribute to new ideas and a drive to make those ideas happen'. In other words, 'while some learners easily manage the work-based learning experience, many find the increased responsibility a struggle' (Boud and Solomon 2001: 31) and as Dalrymple, Kemp and Smith (2014) point out, successful WBL is dependent on upon the propensity for learners to want to learn.

On the other hand, 'WBL supports the personalization of learning' (Chisholm, Harris, Northwood and Johrendt 2009: 319) and so, WBL is well placed to fit a range of learning needs inclusive of a differing preparedness of student undergraduates. The implementation of WBL within the JHE is therefore first and foremost designed with flexibility in mind but secondly to support the variations of combined disciplines that students study.

Engaging Employers

As part of a triadic approach to curriculum re-design, an Employability Stakeholder Group was constructed to feed into the course team's considerations of what constitutes a meaningful placement experience. This is, in part, influenced by the student and their approach to placement but also, and critically the placement context on offer. As Brewer and Mutasa (2006: 34) point out, there is a 'need for a more rigorous assessment of employer organisations prior to allocating students to such places'. For the placement opportunities to provide a positive experience for students, there had to be an understanding of how organisations work and what could be provided integrated into the pre-placement planning. The Stakeholder Group provided an essential sounding board to facilitate improved processes for the arrangement of student placements.

The on-going dialogue between employers and the course team resulted in the development of stronger internal and external partnerships. The membership of the group includes Placement Team; Employability Coordinator; JHE Course Leader; Careers Advisor and a range of local employers. The setting up and on-going work with employers was not without risk. Reeve and Gallacher (2007) highlight the tensions that can be experienced when including employers in university matters given competing ideologies and cultural contexts. However, the role this group played in the revalidation process positively fed into the way in which the integration of placements were conceptualised and subsequently developed.

We now provide some more detail of the enhancements that were made to the integration of placements into the revalidated JHE.

Year one of the new degree structure

Year one requires all JHE students to take a module called 'Learning in Contexts'. The focus is around personal and professional development and the general ethos of this module is around employability. There is a generic set of skills-rich learning outcomes for students to achieve, but they can select their own context within which to develop these.

Some specialisms are accredited including Makaton, a sign language system developed for use with children. Students can take Makaton as a specialism and satisfy the generic learning outcomes for 'Learning in Contexts' as well as gain external accreditation for an award in Makaton. Other specialisms require a mini placement. For instance, the 'Coaching and Mentoring' specialism requires students to go out into schools and work with pupils in the classroom. Other specialisms contain placement-related activities. One example of this can be found in the 'Working with parents and carers' specialism. Whilst much of the learning takes place traditionally in seminar settings, parts of the specialism require day trips to SureStart centres that involve students talking to and liaising with practitioners out in the field. Finally, in some specialisms, the content is entirely theoretical and may be linked to ideas relevant to the workplace but are delivered traditionally though 'on campus' learning. An example of this would be 'Leading Learning', a specialism that covers some introductory theory to the management and leadership involved in education.

In summary, the year one module provides students with a suite of specialisms that vary in the amount of placement activity involved. It is student-led in the sense that students decide for themselves the level of placement and placement-related activities to get involved with at this stage in their degree. In addition, as the specialisms run twice over terms two and three, students have the other option to combine the level of placement and placement-related activity as they see fit thereby providing a structure that enables students to undertake a theoretical specialism followed by a more experiential placement, purely placements outside of the university, or campus based specialisms.

The key focus on the development of generic skills fits well with institution demands in preparing students for the world of work. There is also the added dimension of additional accreditation which positions students positively in the employment market on graduation. Given the composition of students enrolled on the JHE and the increased percentages of those from non-traditional backgrounds, this structure addresses wider political concerns around social mobility (Byrom and Lightfoot, 2013).

Student feedback has reflected positively on the opportunities available to them with many students enjoying the flexibility and range of experiences available. In addition, the offer of externally accredited specialisms has proved to be a selling point during open days. Whilst not the driving force for any changes made, it is further illustrative of the close connections between HE and the notion of an education market and the importance of securing positional advantage (Waters and Brooks, 2013) for students in the employment market.

Year two of the new degree structure

In year two, the students are required to take a formal placement module. In the older degree, this was arranged to take place for six consecutive weeks within term three and constituted a 40cp module. The placement had to be full time and had to be unpaid because 'real questions arise as to whether double loop/triple loop experiential learning can be achieved in a work-based environment where individuals are paid to deliver to a specific job profile' (Chisholm, Harris, Northwood and Johrendt 2009: 329). Students were expected to produce a research report based on the primary research they carried out in their work setting and a reflective commentary articulating the work-based learning they had experienced whilst on placement.

In the new degree structure, the placement module is delivered in one of two formats. A 'field placement module' and a 'taught placement module is now offered. It is anticipated that the 'field' placement module is the version that most students will take. In this form, the module maintains the requirement for students to undertake the equivalent of a minimum of 30 days over the duration of Term 2 in their placement setting. From the point of view of students, this is beneficial as many have caring responsibilities and existing employment commitments that are likely to restrict availability for placement activity (Dalrymple, Kemp and Smith 2014). For employers this also seemed prudent given that some are only able to commit to a smaller number of days per week but over a longer stretch of time. In short, the extended placement period in term 2 follows the ERP model because it gives much more flexibility to employers and can be used to help support placement activity in a way that is most conducive to the organisations' needs.

This structure was directly influenced by employers who raised concerns with the six week block placement model, stating that is caused more problems incorporating students into their work places. This feedback surprised the course team and may be reflective of a lack of dialogue between the institution and employers and the differing cultures of academia and employment identified by Reeve and Gallacher (2007).

The decoupling of the research component from the placement also provided the opportunity to develop a more innovative assessment around placement. The assessment is now focused much more on work based competencies – a development that meets a wider university emphasis on preparing students for the world of work.

Additional unforeseen benefits were also experienced by this decoupling. Student feedback during Year 3 tutorials raised the following concerns:

> *The third year was made more difficult because there was such a big gap between the last assignment and the first hand in*
> *The big gap for Year 2 and Year 3 makes you feel a bit nervous when you come back*
>
> (Year 3 student comments January 2014)

The new structure moved teaching into Term 3 of Year 2, which was not a feature of the old course. With associated assignments, students may feel more connected with their course and the university.

The alternative format on offer to students will be the 'taught' placement module. This permutation is reserved for students who are unable, for a range of reasons, to independently secure their own placement for term two. In these cases, students will be enrolled onto the 'taught' placement at the end of term 1. This module is designed, in part, to support students who possess 'a reluctance to move out of personal comfort zones' (Dalrymple, Kemp and Smith 2014: 85), and to differentiate between the preparedness of individual students to arrange and participate within an identified placement setting. In the 'taught' placement, students will follow a 10-week 20 credit module that requires them to work alongside employers on a project. In this module, the University is much more involved in the initial bringing together of organization and student. The employers' role is to identify a 'mini-project' – a piece of work that needs to be carried out culminating in a tangible product at the end of the module (that students can be marked on). This module very much relies upon the "triadic learning" that Dalrymple, Kemp and Smith (2014) refer to, but also shelters the placement period for those students who need more structure and scaffolding to their experiential learning experience. This model also relies upon the broadened definition of WBL that understands experiential learning as something that can be related to work but undertaken outside of work (Chisholm, Harris, Northwood and Johrendt 2009).

Year three of the new degree structure

Year three will be rolled out in 2015/16 and will require students to undertake a capstone project that represents a 40 credit point module. Students will do this in one of two ways. One way will be to take this as a traditional dissertation by specializing in one of the two disciplines that make up a student's JHE degree. Alternatively, students will be able to take the capstone project in the form of a second placement.

The development of an additional placement in Year 3 was viewed positively by employers and students and appeared to respond to students who had a change of career aspiration following their Year 2 placement. For example, one student stated that after her placement she was '*100% that was not where I wanted to work and it was clear that working at a preschool/nursery was definitely not for me*' (Year 3 student comment January 2014).

Students are required to attend a relevant organization as a part-time placement student over the course of their final year. They use the experience to conduct a piece of research and make links from this to their own professional development, thus being able to further evidence work based competencies associated with that field of work.

Students will be expected to complete a piece of action research using the autobiographic method. This is seen as an important connector between the experiential learning that students undertake whilst on placement on the one hand and the processes of conducting onsite action research on the other hand: '[a]utobiographical writing is common in accounts of action research. Researchers make frequent use of diaries, logs and journals as part of the action-research 'tool-kit'. The final report often contains references to the writers' own lives: their professional development and personal experiences' (Griffiths 1994: 72).

This structure and concomitant assessment therefore provides a mechanism through which students can fully tailor their placement opportunities to reflect their career aspirations or indeed their changing career aspirations.

Conclusion

Developing programmes of learning that are inclusive of placement and placement related activity brings with it 'a radical shift in our assumptions about 'legitimate' knowledge and learning' (Boud and Soloman 2001: 19). This requires careful deliberation in creating new modules and courses of learning that must be supported by sound justification if to defend itself when put under scrutiny, but it also opens up new possibilities by dint of pushing existing boundaries surrounding what higher education actually looks like.

This case study has presented the design of the new JHE course and how the aim of the design has been to create a 'triadic approach' to placement and placement related activities. It has shown how placement and placement related activities have been built into years one, two and three, and how it has been made possible for students to tailor the amount of time they engage with placement activity during the course of their degree. In doing so, the model offers how the new JHE is responsive to the individual needs of a diverse group of students and how students are central in the decision-making process of how much placement involvement they participate in. Employer needs have been highlighted as an on-going concern and are catered for as part of the flexibility built into the programme by offering employers to get involved in different ways, from providing the opportunity for students to speak with them as part of a specialism, to providing part-time placement opportunities for final year students to carry out autobiographic action research over a longer time period.

Additionally, this paper has looked briefly into the assessment strategies that aim to capture the nature of work-based learning through the foregrounding of experiential learning that is both reflective and iterative.

The model we offer here may be of interest to other practitioners who are faced with balancing the needs of their students on one hand, and the needs of employers on the other. This is a critical point as more and more courses (and universities) seek to include placement opportunities within their degree programmes. We hope that the model we offer provides a loose structure for

others to consider how they might design a degree structure with work-based learning components, and how assessment of such activities might be arranged.

What we don't expect is for practitioners to take a carbon copy of this structure – nor do we anticipate that they should want to. And equally, we do not offer this as a model without imperfection. Year 3 student perceptions of curriculum developments have resulted in some negative feedback as they acknowledge what they view as improvements to a course they have just completed. Old challenges are likely to persist in some form no matter what the permutation of course design is, and with an ever changing marketplace for newly made graduates, and a rapidly evolving Higher Education sector, new challenges are certain to emerge.

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