ENHANCING THE WORK PLACEMENT EXPERIENCE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS:

TOWARDS A SUPPORT FRAMEWORK

Abstract

This article reports the findings from an institutional case study into the work placement experience of international students studying at a UK based university. Given the centrality and importance of the employability and internationalisation agendas in Higher Education (HE), little published literature considers both and how they impact upon the work placement experience of international students. With past increases in international student recruitment numbers and the drive for students, regardless of their nationality to gain work experience, there is a need for institutions to better understand work placement from the international students' perspective. Findings revealed challenges exist finding and securing work placement, with critical themes emerging to include placement information, visa rules, culture differences, prior work experience, academic preparation for placement and academic writing ability. A support framework is proposed to assist institutions to consider how they could align their practices to meet international students' work placement and employability needs.

Introduction

In an uncertain economic climate, the longer term prospects for employment are being increasingly considered by students as they embark on higher education (Dow, Heslin, & Mealey, 2014) and engagement with employers is regarded as central to enhancing and supporting student employability (Bullock, Gould, Hejmadi, & Lock, 2009; QAA, 2016; Jones, Green, & Higson, 2015). The value of a work placement for enhancing employment prospects is widely accepted (Clark & Zukas, 2016; Crawford & Wang, 2016; Brooks & Youngson, 2016; AGCAS, 2017). Framed around the need to develop students' employability skills (Bullock et al., 2009), work placement experience has the potential to contribute to students' intellectual growth (Angelidis, Tomic, & Ibrahim, 2004), provide opportunities for reflection upon learning and to put into practice theoretical ideas (Clark & Zukas, 2016). Similar to other forms of service learning which incorporates internship and community based-research, a work placement scheme provides an opportunity for students to develop an awareness of their values, a sense of vocational direction (Clark 2003; Rae, 2007), civic responsibility and ultimately helping students to make good career choices (Hergert, 2011). It has been defined as a mandatory practice element of programme curriculum, which often, but not always, designed to meet the requirements of a Professional, Statutory or Regulatory Body (Saunders and Horner, 2017). Within the UK context, a student work placement scheme may be voluntary or compulsory, of short duration to yearlong, 'sandwiched' between significant periods of on-campus learning or embedded into a 'work-based' unit (Little & Harvey, 2006). The importance of this type of learning was repeatedly enforced by Dearing (1997), Wilson (2012) and the outcomes of the Graduate Market Survey in 2015. Graduates were warned that without industry experience they would be unlikely to be successful during the selection process and would have little or no chance of receiving a job offer. In May, 2016, The UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) released a White Paper: Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice. The importance of career preparation, again, features heavily and the need, in the future, for institutions to publish employability prospects to inform student choice is clearly stated. Employment prospects are also considered by international students looking to study in the UK (Maringe & Carter, 2007). Because of this, it is

important that Higher Education institutions ensure policies and practices prepare International Students as adequately for industry as their UK counterparts. One way is to ensure they are afforded the opportunity to learn from an effective Work Placement experience.

Theoretical underpinning

The theoretical basis for work placement can be said to hinge on Dewey's framework of experiential learning (Dewey 1938). Although Dewey never mentioned the phrase "work placement" in his works, the underlining emphasis on experience, reflection, enquiry and critical thinking which characterise his framework of experiential learning can also be considered to underpin students' work placements. This framework places significant credence on the importance of applicable knowledge rather than learning just for the sake of learning. Although Dewey in his theory of experimentalism believed that experience enhances learning, he also argued that not all experiences were educative and productive. In this light, experience can be termed productive when reflective and critical thinking processes create new meanings, as well as transferrable skills. The experience that ensues from a work placement for instance, can bridge theory and practice by providing students with the reality of the demands inherent in different professions and career paths (Furco 1996; Knouse, Tanner and Harris 1999; Clark 2003; Angelidis and Ibrahim 2004; Herget 2011, AGCAS, 2017). Whilst the idea of completing a work placement has potential for all learners, the context is fundamentally different for the International Students (Naidoo, 2007; Crawford & Wang, 2016) and this is owed to the fact that the primary location of their studies is different from their home countries, this in itself carries some complexities. Therefore, a typology of 'approaches' informed by the work of Knight (2004) to describe approaches to internationalisation, an agenda which has now become an explicit, articulated, institution-wide strategic priority (Gao, 2015) will be used to advance a support framework for international students' work placement experience. The six approaches to internationalisation at an institutional level posited by Knight (2004) centre on the themes of activity, outcome, rational, process, at home and abroad.

The activity-based approach includes curriculum development, institutional linkages, networks and relevant development projects. 'Outcomes' have to do with anticipated goals and targets such as student

competencies and enhanced profile. 'Rationales' involve the underpinning motivation or rationale driving institutional efforts. The 'process-based' approach incorporates an international dimension to activities, policies and procedures. 'At home' which will henceforth be referred to as 'at university' is concern with the ethos, culture and climate on campus that supports internationalisation (Tella, 2011) and 'abroad' fits well with the needs for cross-border information sharing or delivery of education.

With the prioritisation of the HE internationalisation agenda, international student recruitment numbers have been increasing alongside intensified competition between UK based institutions for their recruitment, this in turn has placed pressure on institutions to develop strategies that attract international students (Brown, 2009), as well as provide support to improve upon their experience. The current lack of understanding about international student employability that centres on a work placement scheme suggests that institutions may be limited in their ability to produce effective institutional strategies that ensure positive international student work placement experiences. The majority of what we already know focuses on the UK home student and pedagogic questions have been raised regarding whether current teaching and learning practices cater for both (Crawford & Wang, 2016). Since the need to gain work experience extends to include all students, to question the effectiveness of existing HE practices in the area work placement and international student employability is appropriate. What has already been identified is that cultural values may affect some dimensions of career development (Reynolds & Constantine, 2007) and international students may need assistance gaining work experience, with job search skills and career planning (Spencer-Rogers, 2000). A lack of understanding remains regarding mobility in the UK, career intentions and approaches to manage international student employability (Huang, 2013; Crawford & Wang, 2016) including work placement experiences. As a consequence, this may detrimentally affect the international students' well-being and overall study experience (Barton, Hartwig & Cain, 2015). Therefore it is important that the issues underpinning the placement experience of international students are identified, considered and acted upon.

In order to complement existing literature as well as assist institutions to improve the international student work placement experience, this article will explore the challenges experienced by a sample of international students from a UK based university when finding, securing and completing a work

placement scheme. Challenges identified will be discussed and the framework of internationalisation from an institutional point proposed by Knight (2004) would be adapted to help construct a support framework for consideration institution-wide. The purpose of which, is to help ensure, existing and future employability policies and practices remain effectively aligned to meet international student work placement and employability needs.

Methodology

An institutional case study design was adopted and the HE institution selected for this study may be considered a classic model of an international university with ambition to re-profile the student body to become increasingly international thus moving toward the satellite model proposed by Knight (2016). The sample population was drawn from the Faculty of Management which has been delivering sandwich degrees for over 15 years and for the majority of programmes, a 40 week work placement is compulsory during the third year of study. The Faculty also houses degree pathways known traditionally to recruit substantial numbers of international students (Crawford & Wang, 2016) and for the purpose of this article, international students are defined as non-citizens of the UK rather than non-domicile.

Two instruments for data collection were employed. These included a questionnaire: the Bristol Online Survey tool (BOS) and a focus group discussion (FGD). Ethical approval to undertake this study was sought from the university's Research Ethics Committee and informed consent was obtained to record focus group discussion and all students were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. For the first phase of the research, three final year international students were recruited to help administer the project and to inform the questionnaire design which addressed gender, nationality, age; programme of study; placement organisation, location; placement optionality; prior expectations; types of support; experiences and recommendations for work placement improvement. These students disseminated the questionnaire to their peers who were final year students eligible to participate. It was hoped that the use of international students to disseminate the survey and to communicate with the international respondents would help mitigate power differences and elicit more in-depth and honest responses. All of the international students (68) enrolled within the targeted faculty were approached with 41

responding (60.29%). 20 different nationalities took part and placement durations ranged from four weeks to one and a half years with 85% of students completing a minimum of 40 weeks.

The second research phase involved focus group discussion where participants were recruited through the online survey. The use of focus group is particularly useful in generating ideas and in the case of this article, explored different themes pertinent to the international student work placement experience. Recordings from the focus group which was comprised of four participants were transcribed and analysed thematically (Fugard & Potts, 2015). The next section will unveil some of the themes that emerged from research data as issues facing the placement experience of international students. Where Knight's (2004) six categories of activity, outcome, rationale, process, at home and abroad pertain to institutional activities which impact the international students, for the purpose of this article, these have been adjusted to also consider practices by students and external parties such as community-based organisations, if they were shown to impact the international student work placement experience.

Issues underpinning the international student work placement experience

Existing research that looks at the more generic international student experience refers to administrative processes, cultural norms and employability (Quaye & Harper, 2014); the curriculum, professional and organisational rules/policies (Barton, Hartwig & Cain 2015); academic, social and cultural issues, information, support systems (Ramachandran, 2011), active learning, internships and organisational support (Ito, 2015). The outcomes of this study uncovered complementary themes including work placement information, visa rules, cultural differences, self-confidence, prior work experience, academic preparation and academic writing ability.

Lack of information about the work placement and visa rules

Findings from this study complements those identified by Barton, Hartwig & Cain (2015) where some students are not aware they will need to undertake a work placement until it is upon them and remain insufficiently informed about the demands and nature of the placement, the companies, the types of work options on offer or the duration (Bullock et al., 2009). The lack of understanding was attributed

firstly to cultural backgrounds with one focus group participant noting that: "in my country there is no such thing as a work placement, so many people abroad (outside the UK) would not be aware of this, work experience prior to getting a job is not required or expected" and secondly, to an inability for many international students to physically attend University Open Days designed to inform prospective students of the nature of academic programmes at the university and prerequisites for admission. Considering that non-digital sources of information are associated with more significant geographic barriers (ISS, 2016) and many international students are recruited in their home countries through third-parties such as commissioned agents (Choudaha & Chang, 2012), this response is not surprising and was a common theme for all focus group participants. Although many UK universities have an international office or equivalent (Ramachandran, 2011), one focus group participant noted inadequate signposting of work placement information across the institution and that: "UK domicile students are very informed but for international student, it is even more important that the work placement is explained because of the visa restrictions". All focus group participants identified a lack of understanding about the visa restrictions that apply when looking to find and secure a work placement. Although the visa rules that apply to students' work placements are fairly lenient, the same cannot be said for graduate roles and any other form of employment that falls under a different UK Visa Tier such as Tier 2 (general) visa. The main problem with this set up is that it makes it difficult for students to gain permanent employment in their placement company. One focus group participant commented that they secured their placement because they wanted to work for a company that would employ them upon graduation but at the time of application they did not realise that the organisation would have to be officially registered and to actively sponsor them. This suggests that international students are not well informed about the visa rules relating to employment in the UK, a major issue with trying to secure a work placement, especially a paid one. This is because foreign students are only allowed to work a maximum of 20 hours per week during term time (UKCISA 2015; Anderson 2010). Ruhanen, Robinson and Breakey (2013, p.2) observed that "immigration and visa regulations imposed on the number of hours that international students can work can also be a challenge in some situations, particularly for students seeking paid work experiences as opposed to supervised work experiences as part of an educational qualification which can be exempted from such restrictions." A cap on the number of

working hours can potentially make it difficult for international students to achieve meaningful work placement or part-time employment that can allow them to gain the relevant skills that will be useful in their future placement. Although this is a challenge, it is also important for international students who are bound by such regulations to be informed of them so that rules are not broken and the student's academic programme endangered.

Culture differences

One recurrent theme that emerged from the research data was the need to engage international students with UK students within the class room environment as a way to foster culture adaptation, integration and to boost self-confidence. One focus group participant suggested that international students should be: "pushed on being as active as possible through the Student Union. Get them involved; place them to work in teams amongst English people". The merits of including greater cross cultural co-curricular collaboration for international students includes a positive effect on psychological adjustment (Cigularova, 2005; Zhang & Goodson, 2011), improvements in behavioural competence (Hirai, Frazier & Syed, 2015) and reduced incidence of depression (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Benefits are also afforded to the UK home student. According to the theory of Psychological acculturation, continuous first hand contact with other culturally distinct groups will change how group members' view the world (Graves, 1967). Cross cultural peer to peer leaning will also provide opportunities for UK domicile students not keen on outward mobility, to maximise the culture capital provided by international students by gaining international experience through relations with peers from other nations (Ryan & Hellmundt, 2005). Additionally, focus group participants were unanimous about their lack of confidence with the application process, psychometric testing, when attending assessment centres and at interview. As a result, these participants asked for additional assistance in all areas to help prepare them for placement and compulsory self-confidence workshops, a form of Psychosocial mentoring which may be considered an antidote to timidity and lack of confidence.

From the survey respondents, 45 percent reported cultural factors as a challenge when applying for and during the placement itself with all focus group participants identifying these factors as barriers stalling

or preventing full integration into the UK's mainstream society. Specifically, a lack of understanding of UK work culture negatively impacted the placement experience and student self-confidence levels. Only 32 percent of survey respondents felt that they had been provided with sufficient preparation by the institution to effectively adapt to the UK work culture. Although HE focuses on the internationalisation of the curriculum in the sense of preparing UK graduates for a global career (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Crossman & Clarke, 2010), a relevant consideration, which may be stating the obvious, is whether the employability driven curriculum is being adapted to consider cultural differences in order to prepare international students' effectively for an international work placement in the UK?

Academic preparation and work experience prior to the work placement

Focus group participants reinforced the existence of a disconnect between the curriculum content and industry needs with one participant noting that: "university is sometimes separate from the real world such that whatever the university teaches might not be relevant in real life". To help reduce this disconnect, through experiential learning (Dewey 1938), finding ways for international students to gain experience of the UK work culture prior to taking up a work placement would be of benefit. Additionally, another focus group participant highlighted that: "if you're not used to the English culture, you will not get the best placement experience because this unawareness limits you" with another participant adding that: "the lack of work experience creates a barrier to obtain what might be considered a good placement or the choices that might be available". Research participants noted the importance of gaining work experience to increase their chances of securing a work placement but also the range of choice available to them. Even though students are looking to secure a placement only, they are still applying to work in the UK and competition for roles is fierce. Students are aware that they are required to demonstrate certain skills and attributes before they stand a chance of securing an interview or job role (Fliers 2015). However, it has been noted that in some countries where international students hail from, work experience is not required to secure employment whereas this need is entrenched within the UK culture (Dearing, 1997; Cranmer, 2006; Rae, 2007). In other cultures, the ideology of 'godfatherism' is common place (Albert, 2006; Adeoye, 2009), where one's person to person connectivity (or who you know) triumphs over experience when it comes to securing a job.

Based upon this reality, international students studying in the UK from nations where godfatherism is a dominant phenomenon arrive with less work experience than their UK counterparts who already have established practical experiences due to culture orientation.   Because a work placement is meant to bridge both theory and practice as universities seek to prepare their graduates for transition into work (McKinney, Haberman, Stafford-Johnson, & Robinson, 2008; Hergert, 2011; Brooks & Youngson, 2016), work experience prior to commencement of work placement should assist international students with their transition into the UK work culture and the work placement itself.
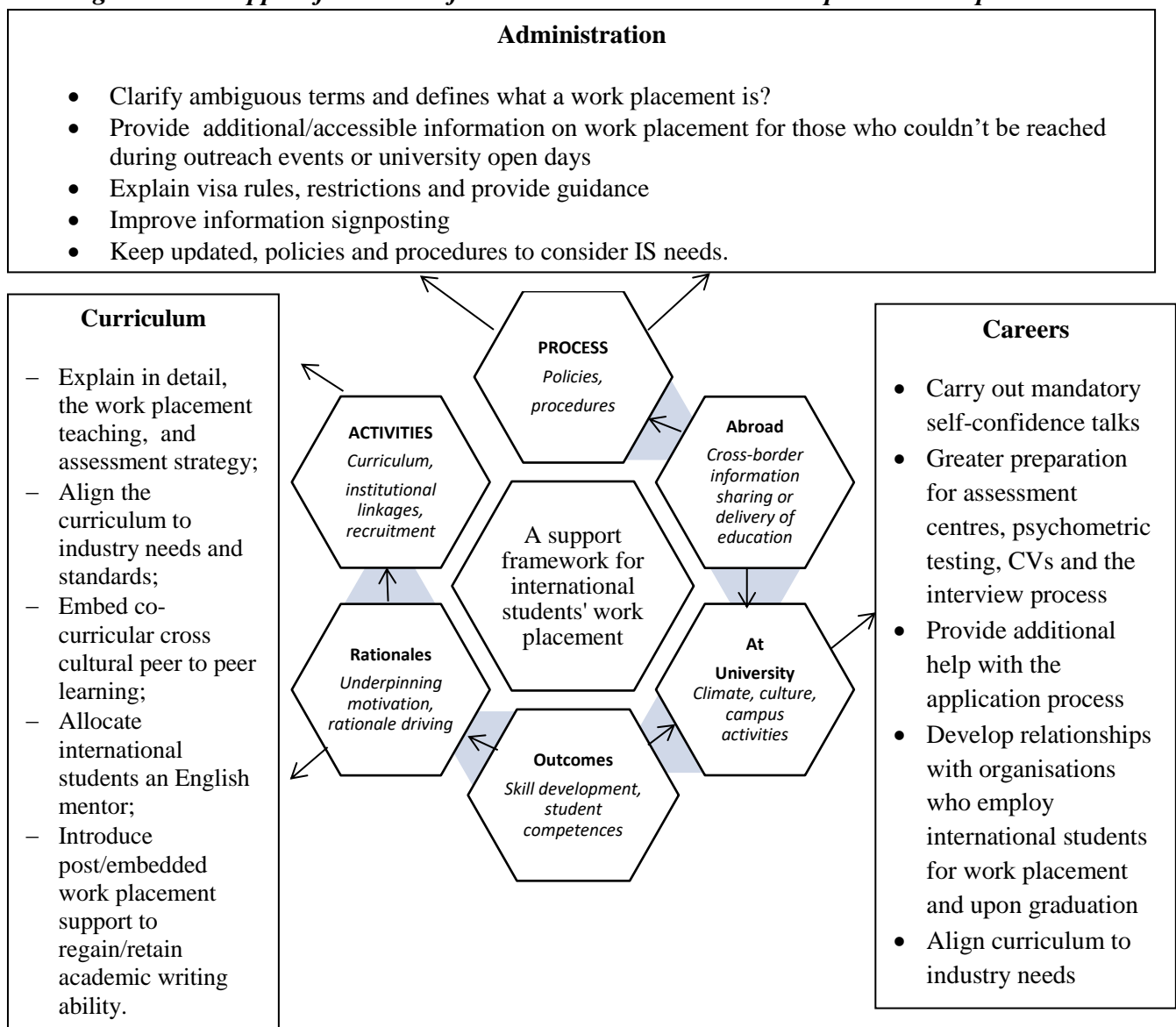
Loss of academic writing ability upon return from placement

There are contrasting views about whether students' academic performance is improved or adversely affected due to time away from academic studies. Despite some literature asserting that a work placement may not exert a negative impact on academic performance (Bullock et al. 2009; Brooks and Youngson 2016; Crawford and Wang 2016; Jones, et al., 2015); the findings from this study indicate that students felt a considerable loss of academic writing skill upon their return. Some participants noted that not attending a placement would have been preferable to the loss of academic writing ability which they felt could potentially negatively affect their final degree classification and ability to secure an ideal graduate role (Daly and Briggs, 2017). This is not surprising as it has been found that international students usually regard their academic success as their first priority (Jenny, Lin and Kishimoto 2003). Whether the rate of loss of academic skill is increased for international students by comparison to their UK domicile counterparts must be considered. Also, while a yearlong placement can negatively impact academic ability due to a loss of academic writing skills, this may occur over a shorter period of time when considering the exacerbated challenges faced by international students due to language barriers, culture differences, financial limitations and other social issues when they transit from a university setting into a work setting and back to the former. This being considered, the work placement experience is more likely to have a positive impact on a student's learning experience if they are encouraged to regularly reflect, applying theories even during hands on activities (Jones, Green & Higson, 2015). This may help to keep the students connected with coursework and academic writing ability could be retained.

A support framework for international students' work placement experience

In order to provide guidance to institutions, figure 1.0 brings to the fore a support framework for consideration university-wide to help ensure that work placement processes and practices for international students are effectively aligned to their employability needs. The issues facing the work placement experience of international students have been clearly identified and the themes will now be further subcategorised into administration, the curriculum and the careers service

Figure 1.0 A support framework for international students' work placement experience

Administration

- Clarify ambiguous terms and defines what a work placement is?
- Provide additional/accessible information on work placement for those who couldn't be reached during outreach events or university open days
- Explain visa rules, restrictions and provide guidance
- Improve information signposting
- Keep updated, policies and procedures to consider IS needs.

Curriculum

- Explain in detail, the work placement teaching, and assessment strategy;
- Align the curriculum to industry needs and standards;
- Embed co-curricular cross cultural peer to peer learning;
- Allocate international students an English mentor;
- Introduce post/embedded work placement support to regain/retain academic writing ability.

PROCESS
Policies, procedures

ACTIVITIES
Curriculum, institutional linkages, recruitment

Abroad
Cross-border information sharing or delivery of education

A support framework for international students' work placement

Rationales
Underpinning motivation, rationale driving

At University
Climate, culture, campus activities

Outcomes
Skill development, student competences

Careers

- Carry out mandatory self-confidence talks
- Greater preparation for assessment centres, psychometric testing, CVs and the interview process
- Provide additional help with the application process
- Develop relationships with organisations who employ international students for work placement and upon graduation
- Align curriculum to industry needs

Source: Adapted from Knight's (2004) approaches to internationalisation from an institutional level

Administration

The need for effective HE administrative processes is not a new requirement however findings indicate that although efforts are being made, the level of clarity required to compensate for cultural differences is still not enough. Research data suggests that several international students lack understanding about what a work placement would entail, if it was compulsory, the activities they would be responsible for and the academic support available to them. In the main, cultural differences alongside an inability to physically attend open days intended to provide prospective students with relevant information were held as responsible. This highlights the need for additional placement information for those who cannot physically attend university forums where key terms are clarified. This is important when the meaning and interpretation of a work placement scheme may differ, depending upon an individual's cultural background. Basic explanations of culture and custom are conveyed more effectively face to face and improved in-house training of academics responsible for international student recruitment may be required.   If students are recruited in their home countries by third parties, what the placement will entail needs to be more clearly stated because unfulfilling or shattering international students preconceived beliefs may result in disillusionment (Liu & Winder, 2014).

The challenges associated with visa rules are already known and information to assist students is available at universities, however, dissemination via a wider range of sources may be required (Ramachandran, 2011). This could include improved signposting via the staff responsible for student recruitment, administration, careers, academic advisors and/or those who have the responsibility for providing student mentoring and counselling.

As the student population is culturally diverse, there is a need to consider if existing administrative practices are being effectively and continually adapted to meet the needs of the international students. A lack of coordination among different university departments may also lead to confusion (Ramachandran, 2011) which may extend to staff across the university if no in-house training exists or they lack direct and extended inter-cultural experience (Starr-Glass, 2011). Furthermore, an important educational aspect of international student services is the provision of learning assistance which may contribute to overcome the challenge of interpersonal interactions across cultures (Hiratsuka, Suzuki &

Pusina, 2016). In order that staff better understand the challenges that international students face and how different cultures and customs may impact their level of understanding about a work placement and what is required, more or improved in-house training of university staff could prove to be beneficial.

The curriculum

The participants' perceived loss of skill was a recurrent theme and additional support was requested to help regain lost academic writing ability and/or to implement a form of placement assessment or reflection that helps to assist skill retention. The loss of a student's academic writing ability upon return from placement is also a consideration for the UK domicile student but universities need to consider if the rate of skill loss is exacerbated when studying in a foreign language.

Given that cultural factors were reported to negatively impact the placement experience, this reinforces the need for peer to peer learning with UK domicile students to facilitate international student learning. Group work where teams have mixed nationalities is not without its challenges (Liu & Winder, 2014) but worth promoting due to the mutual benefits for both the international and home student to maximise culture capitals of each other (Ryan & Hellmundt, 2005). Difficulties with integration have been attributed to host nationals reluctance to engage with international students and home based students need to be motivated to want to work cross culturally and to recognise collaboration as an opportunity to develop global understanding, cultural sensitivity and ultimately their CV.   The context and benefits of peer assisted learning (PAL) is not limited to UK domicile students helping their international counterparts. International students who have had a successful placement can share their experience with other international students who are considering taking up a work placement. This is similar to a placement PAL scheme operating in one UK based university whereby final year students who have just returned from their placement provide support to second year students as they prepare for their own placement (Renaud, 2017).

Furthermore, instead of limiting the notion of internationalising the curriculum and experience for the UK domicile students, this study has found that there is also a need to internationalise the international students' experience. Universities need to be doing more to make use of the co-curricular to prepare

international students for a work placement in the UK and to recognise that this experience is in-fact, an international work placement and the students should be prepared accordingly.

Careers Service

Participants noted the importance of gaining work experience to increase their chances of securing a work placement and the range of choices available to them. It is important to reiterate, some cultures do not require previous work experience and international students may find themselves in need of assistance to secure such work, with job-search skills and career planning (Spencer-Rodgers, 2000). This extends to completing application forms, psychometric tests, how to manage the assessment centre process and at interview.

University relations with work placement providers who frequently recruit international students need to be nurtured to create roll in roll out placements where they employ international students on an annual basis. HE institutions need to develop links and partnerships with placement providers for regular feedback in order to ensure successful outcomes (Clair-Thompson, 2017). In addition, relationships with these providers about their obligations and mentoring roles can be established and developed within a win-win basis. Liu & Winder (2015) suggested that universities should ask industry companies in advance about their expectations as well as job descriptions and to match international students to their needs. This should help to ensure positive work experiences with effective mentoring. It was also noted that those providers who frequently engaged with international students provide overall a better placement experience.

Conclusion

This study is the first of only a few to explore the experiences of international students and their work placement experience. It is evident that students do experience challenges from the outset, exacerbated often by a lack of understanding about what a work placement is and what it will entail. Institutions need to be reminded of the impact of cultural backgrounds upon a student's understanding and interpretation of the meaning of ambiguous or complicated terminology or language which simply has no meaning to their culture. Without full comprehension, international students will be disadvantaged when searching

for and competing against UK domicile students for work placement opportunities and graduate roles. Furthermore, employability provision and the need for an internationalised curriculum are embedded in most institutions, often, highly effectively and through work placements. However, the UK HE system is geared mainly towards the domicile students. Institutions need to be reminded of the increasingly diverse student body and although practices may be established and respected, their currency with regard to international students' work placement may need to be reviewed. Whilst the sample size of this study was limited to the number of international students within the university faculty investigated, a large range of nationalities were included and findings were found to be generalisable across nationalities. This supports other research which has found that some generalisations can be applied to the understanding of international students' experience during practicum (Barton, Hartwig & Cain, 2015) and that despite the great variety of cultures, the challenges they face tend to be relatively similar (Quaye & Harper, 2014). The outcomes of this study may therefore provide an indication of the bigger picture of the placement experience of international students and what support framework can be adopted. Furthermore, the focus on the international student does not imply that findings are not applicable to the UK domicile student as many of the outcomes are applicable to other categories of students. Whilst this research centred on a single instrumental case study, a future study involving other universities would provide the basis for comparative analysis drawing on a wider range of best practices and lessons learned in addition to investigating the obligations and mentoring roles of work placement providers.

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