

# **Short-Term Student-Led Consultancy Placements: A Benefit for Employers and Solution to the Challenges of a Year in Business?**

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## **Abstract**

A year in business with a larger organisation has been the traditional approach to providing a placement route into work experience for undergraduates and postgraduates within business schools. It is generally accepted that this work experience placement provides personal, professional and academic benefits to the placement student. However, the value and outcomes for the placement employer have received less focus; some benefits have been recognised but only at a headline level.

Now that a year in business is becoming less attractive for students and a challenge for employers, a short-term placement programme has been established at Worcester Business School in which students undertake a specific tailored project within the Student-Led Consultancy Placement Programme. These short-term work experience placements focus on environmental impact reduction for smaller employers. This was chosen for the student-led consultancy focus as Worcester Business School is located within a region dominated by SMEs. Environmental management is a known skills gap for them, and students will need environmental management knowledge and skills in their future workplaces. These placements that are designed to provide a less challenging route into work experience, one that can encourage them to explore career options in a real-world business environment. It also provides businesses with an affordable, skilled resource to complete an improvement project.

This paper uses an example of a short-term student-led consultancy project to offer a new approach to work experience placements and explore the benefits that this can offer the placement employer.

**Key words:** Placement, Student-led consultancy, Work experience

## **1. Introduction**

Internships and work placements have been offered to undergraduates and postgraduates as a route into work experience over the last decades, with long held agreements of the benefits to individuals both academically and professionally widely published. This focus on graduate work readiness skills emerged from the mass education and marketisation of higher education, resulting in competition between universities and the move from graduate workplace training programmes to the recruitment of work-ready graduates (Green, Hanmer & Star, 2008). It is now expected that universities will prepare students to operate effectively in their future workplaces (Docherty, 2014).

Many employers no longer consider a focused undergraduate degree to be sufficient for entry into their workforces (Jackson et al, 2017). Unfortunately, unlike health and engineering courses, business degrees frequently lack a core element dedicated to gaining experience in a professional setting. Consequently, many students graduate unable to demonstrate their preparedness for employment (Smith, Ferns & Russell, 2016). A solution to this is for students to undertake a work experience placement that enables them to explore career options, become familiar with workplace expectations, and recognise their skills and skills gaps, and make informed choices about their next steps (Education & Training Foundation, 2021; Institute of Student Employers, 2021).

Despite the links between Higher Education and business being fundamental in enhancing the quality of the workforce and enriching students' learning (Bullock, Gould & Hejmadi, 2009; Institute of Student Employers, 2021), the benefits from recruiting a placement student to the

employing organisation have received little recognition and research has generally only considered the benefits as generic headline items. There is little specific detail of the benefits for individual companies or suggestions on how specific placements can bring value to the placement employer.

This study contributes to closing this gap by highlighting the benefits available to the employer of a placement student using the Student-Led Consultancy Placement Programme as an example. This short-term alternative to the traditional 12-month 'year in business' offers diversity, creativity and innovation within a cost-effective skilled resource, as well as engaging students in a potentially more manageable work-based learning experience that can help develop their resources in the context of the real-world job market (Finch et al, 2016). They also maintain the familiarity of friends and family as they undertake a work placement whilst studying. This approach may overcome the declining interest in and reluctance to undertake the year in business placement.

The study suggests a novel short-term, project based environmental improvement placement may help to overcome the challenges of traditional a placement, and highlights the benefits available to employers. Hopefully this will incentivise local organisations to participate in this and share the benefits available from recruiting student consultants.

## **2. The Benefits of Student Placements for Employers**

Previous research into this area has generally accepted that there are demonstrable benefits for the employing organisation (E.g., Blackwell et al, 2001; Bullock et al, 2009; Paisey & Paisey, 2010; Allen et al, 2013; Finch et al, 2016; Brooks & Youngson, 2016; Crawford & Wang, 2016; Römgens et al, 2020). At a basic level recruiting a placement student can offer a low-cost extra pair of hands (Jackson et al, 2017). This view misses the benefits that can make a business more sustainable: reduced costs, innovative and diverse resources, fresh ideas and the latest thinking (Placement Scotland, 2019). Placement students can also form part of a longer-term recruitment or Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategy. These are explored in more detail below.

### **2.1 Placement Students as Innovative Resource**

Placement students provide an opportunity for organisations to gain access to fresh talent with fresh ideas (Placement Scotland, 2019; Bespoke HR, 2021). Placement students also offer employers opportunities to recruit different types of staff with different skillsets in the low risk, lower cost placement environment (Bespoke HR, 2021). They can bring creativity, innovation and new perspectives as well as additional resources. (Jackson et al, 2017). This can be accounted as a variable, indirect labour cost, rather than fixed cost, to further benefit the employing organisation (Indeed, 2022).

Placement students with innovative skillsets and qualities can provide a temporary resource that closes a skills gap. This can be particularly useful for a specific project where existing resources are unavailable, or a specific skillset is not available internally (Bespoke HR, 2021). Having one person with appropriate skills focus on one piece of work for a fixed period can be very productive (Institute of Student Employers, 2021). As students seeking placements put themselves forward with support from their university, they are likely to possess the hoped-for skills. In addition, as working with underrepresented groups is high on universities' agendas, these groups are frequently encouraged, giving more company diversity as well as helping students build confidence and resilience (Institute of Student Employers, 2021).

### **2.2 Placement Students as a Recruitment Pipeline**

Student work experience placements may help to reduce recruitment costs both in the short and longer term. In the short-term, costs are reduced as placements generally receive applications from a pool of talented individuals who offer themselves in response to a single job advert (Education & Training Foundation, 2021). For SMEs such roles are often advertised

through a university free of charge. In the longer-term, recruitment costs are reduced, and a recruitment pipeline created, as placement students frequently return to their placement organisation after graduation and/or encourage their friends to apply (Placement Scotland, 2019; Bespoke HR, 2021.). This can encourage retention as well as reducing recruitment costs. To compare, 47% of graduates leave their first job after graduation in the first five years if they have not previously completed a work placement, with 20% changing their career path (Institute of Student Employers, 2021).

Companies can also teach placement students bespoke skills that they need (Placement Scotland, 2019). In addition, the need to manage the placement can support the development of existing staff skills, including the promotion of supervisory skills such as coaching and mentoring, which in turn can boost morale (Bespoke HR, 2021).

### **2.3 Placement Students' Contribution to a CSR Strategy**

Taking on a placement student can contribute to CSR and sustainability practices, which in turn can also offer a PR benefit that increases the attractiveness of employment (Placement Scotland, 2019). It also gives something back to the student community (Education & Training Foundation, 2021) whilst narrowing the skills gaps in their industrial or service sector (Education & Training Foundation, 2021).

It is also widely accepted as an effective means to enable future graduates to both obtain and retain a job (Van der Heije and Van der Heije, 2006) and help the economy by preparing students for the world of work (Education & Training Foundation 2021), thus contributing to sustainable development goals, specifically Goals 7 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and 9 (Industry Innovation and Infrastructure), in the world-wide programme that drives government, business and individuals to make the world a better place (United Nations, no date).

### **2.4 Challenges of Placements**

Traditionally placements for students have operated as a year in business within an undergraduate or postgraduate programme, with higher education perceived as preparation for work and employability (Eraut, 2009; Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Hodkinson, 2005)

However, despite the personal, professional and academic benefits for students that can promote success in the hyper-competitive graduate job market, there has been a significant downward trend in number of students opting for such a long-term placement (Finch et al. 2016). This may be due to a lack of confidence and self-awareness, personal responsibilities, unwillingness to leave friends and family, a lack of understanding of the benefits of taking a placement, or desire to complete formal education as soon as possible (Education & Training Foundation, 2021; Institute of Student Employers, 2021)

Employing organisations also face challenges in offering a placement. In smaller organisations where staff perform multiple functions there may be little time to train and support a placement student and long-term placements may be too costly (Jackson et al, 2017). It is frequently difficult to gauge the level of administration and coordination required so the placement can be difficult to cost (Clark et al, 2014). In addition, many employers' have little comprehension of how to get involved, identify a suitable student, identify a suitable project or tasks for the placement, generate resources to coordinate the placement and/or how to supervise and mentor the student (Jackson et al, 2017). Ultimately some placements may not add value or operate poorly as there is a misalignment between the employer's expectations and arrangements and the purpose of the placement expected by the university (Patrick et al, 2009). University coordinators, workplace supervisors, and students must collaborate closely to maximise the placement's value (Dalrymple, Kemp & Smith, 2014).

### **3. Responding to Placement Challenges**

These challenges can be overcome to encourage more students to take this step to explore a potential future career as advocated by Institute of Student Employers (2021) and develop their competitive advantage and personal resources in the highly competitive graduate job market (Van der Heije & van de Heije, 2006; Finch et al, 2016). Worcester Business School (WBS) has developed an innovative approach to placements: a short-term student-led environmental impact consultancy placement. The student acts as a consultant and focuses on a project that will develop understanding of environmental impacts for the organisation, such as an environmental audit. This is tailored to each organisation and lasts for three months; the student works a maximum of 20 hours per week whilst maintaining their studies. This provides the employer with a cost-effective skilled resource for around 12-15% of the cost of a year-long placement, for 30% of the cost of an established business consultant. It may also be more attractive to students than a long-term placement.

Due to the location of Worcester Business School and the recruitment of undergraduates from local areas which tend to be dominated by SMEs, most students progress into employment with smaller organisations after graduation. To develop familiarity with their potential future work environment, as well as assisting local organisations access innovative skillsets, SMEs are targeted for these placements. The environmental focus was chosen as it is becoming increasingly obvious that there are increasing demands for environmental impact improvements from customers, from legislation and from desire to become more responsible. Often, organisations lack the knowledge and skills to deliver these. WBS is also a sustainable and ethical business school with a clear focus on responsible management education and has the expertise and resource to support students and companies.

To maximise the positive outcomes, WBS staff train the student in appropriate data collection, analysis and presentation techniques based on established environmental auditing and reporting processes such as through ISO14001, ISO 50001 and the Global Reporting Initiatives. In addition, they support the student and business throughout the agreed placement period.

#### **3.1 An Example of the Student-Led Consultancy Placement**

The student-led consultancy project explored here was established with a specialist plastic manufacturing and distribution company close to the business school. The project emanated from their request for help to understand their carbon emissions and provide suggestions on how they could be reduced.

The placement employer had a clear rationale for commissioning this project. As they work within the specialist plastics industry, they face a growing demand for carbon emissions data from customers. Many tender submission documents now demand carbon emissions data, with some public tendering bodies excluding potential suppliers without that data plus a formal carbon management strategy. The inclusion of this data in tenders is soon to become a mandatory requirement for public bodies. The placement employer also wanted to adopt good carbon management practices but struggled to find sufficient and appropriate internal resources for data collection and analysis.

After initial discussions the business development manager, placement coordinator, and sustainability lead in the business school proposed a placement role designed to establish Scope 1 and 2 emissions for the placement employer. The planned output was designed to be used for tender documentation and provide the baseline from which to develop a carbon management strategy. The employer and student agreed to run the project online. The employer had previous successful experience of working with placement students from WBS so was confident of the opportunity a student placement could provide them.

#### **4. Impact of the Student-Led Consultancy Project**

Upon completion of the project the placement employer was asked to reflect on the placement process, outcomes and impact so as to capture and share the benefits of the placement project. They were also asked which specific parts of the project worked well and to suggest potential improvements that could enhance future projects. The findings of this reflection are presented below.

##### **4.1 Benefits for the Company Provided by the Placement Student**

The key benefit of the placement student's work was the clear understanding that carbon emissions are a greater problem than previously thought. The end-of-placement report detailed the source of emissions and the environmental impacts. This provided a baseline understanding for the organisation and a tool for corporate communication. The chief executive provided all staff with the report and has adopted its findings to develop a corporate vision and environmental impact reduction strategy. The senior leadership team has committed to move forward by setting targets to reduce energy consumption and emissions. The senior leadership team were so impressed with the report they published it to their customers and LinkedIn community.

Following the placement student's calculation of Scope 1 and 2 emissions and proposal of emissions reduction interventions, work is now under way to understand carbon offsetting opportunities and sources of lower carbon electricity. For example, the placement student identified an opportunity to reduce emissions by sourcing electricity from suppliers who provide lower carbon power, e.g., EDF from nuclear generation or Octopus from wind generation, both of which could also offer a slight cost saving. This opportunity has been built into the contract renewal process.

The student's work also highlighted the company's corporate culture as a contributing factor. Carbon emissions were perceived as everyone's problem, therefore they have become no one's problem. From this new understanding senior management recognised the need to rethink their current sustainability organisation and staff responsibilities. This work is now under way.

The emissions data collected and analysed has presented information with which to make evidence-based decisions on sourcing, logistics and stock holding practice e.g., the airfreighting of products from US vs. increased stock holding to facilitate sea freight. Emissions data established through this placement is being used in decision making. The data is now key to the company's application for EcoVardis supply chain accreditation which is required for public body tenders.

The placement student raised questions about practices and the understanding of their impacts, e.g., why do different plants consume fuel differently? Why are there different fuel suppliers and different fuel tariffs in different plants? Why are there differences in heating systems across the buildings? The answers to these questions will become a core part of the placement employer's carbon management plan which is currently under development.

A key challenge for the employer is now to explore the practical implications of the placement students' work and to understand what can be done to have less impact on the environment, as well as what cannot be done due to the nature of their business.

##### **4.2 Good Practice in Student-Led Consultancy Projects**

The main learning was that basing it on a single problem worked well. The employer made a clear problem statement, giving a clear focus to all participants. It also defined the timeframe and what the employer expected from the student. This expectation was fully met.

Establishing a single project lead who operates as the placement student's mentor was highlighted by the placement employer as good practice. The project lead had previously run student placements and worked in academia so knew how to support the student. However,

whilst this was beneficial, previous experience is not considered a prerequisite for a consultancy placement. Staff from WBS can coach and support the placement lead(s) as well as the student when required.

The formal communication processes and informal opportunities to ask ad hoc questions were considered valuable for the effective running of the project. The employer and student agreed to hold monthly project reviews and weekly meetings for updates. In addition, the placement student and project lead established a Teams chat for ad hoc communication.

## 5. Conclusion

From the reflections on the short-term student-led consultancy project presented above it is clear a valuable impact was made for the placement employer, one which did not end on conclusion of the placement. The placement student delivered the expected outcome, the Scope 1 and 2 emissions data and opportunities to mitigate emissions impact, along with additional benefits, for example the need to manage the company culture and staffing differently to achieve the carbon management focus desired.

Overall, the project has provided an emissions baseline and opportunities for improvement. The placement employer can gain both financially and strategically whilst contributing to the sustainable development goals and mitigation of climate change.

For further information or to discuss a potential student-led consultancy project please contact the authors of this paper

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