

A matter of identity or commodity? An exploration of the impact of work placement experience on Information Technology undergraduates

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Policy discourse often construes higher education primarily as equipping graduates with the means to be successful in their working lives (see, for example, Dearing, 1997; DfEE, 2000; Tomlinson, 2007) via the development of individual graduate employability. Employability is often expressed as an individual property (in policy terms at least) achieved through the acquisition of specific employability skills and graduate attributes that are of general use in workplaces and in career planning. From this perspective to become employable is to acquire the correct mix of skills and attributes.

Since it is argued that university academic experience alone is often insufficient in enabling students to develop their employability to appropriate levels (Tomlinson, 2008), a 'gap' is thought to exist between undergraduate study and employability requirements (Hills et al, 2003). One way of closing this 'gap' is to include elements of work-based learning (such as placements) as part of degree programmes (Harvey, Moon and Geall, 1997; Reddy and Moores, 2006).

The advantages of placements tend to be expressed in terms of opportunities for the development and rehearsal of general employability skills (Gomez, Lush and Clements, 2004; Ahier et al, 2000) suggesting that placements can be understood in terms of providing standardised, predictable placement experiences that produce 'oven-ready' graduates (Atkins, 1999) for the employment market.

This paper challenges the notion of a standardised placement experience through exploring the experiences of undergraduates who have returned to university from a year-long work placement in order to understand the impact of their work-based learning experience.

Data is presented from six interviews with final year undergraduate students all of whom had completed a placement as part of their degree programme. The interview data was gathered from a wider project (involving 36 participants), conducted in the Computing Department of a large pre-1992 university in England. This wider project explored these undergraduates' transitions from university to work.

Variable placement outcomes were articulated by participants. This included skills acquisition (a standardised discourse account), no benefits whatsoever and also two participants who described themselves as personally transformed in their approach to learning when they returned to university. It is argued that the impact of placement experiences is better thought of in terms of an emergent identity that exists in relation to prevailing sociocultural context(s) and not the acquisition of commodities (skills, attributes). An Interpretive framework based around Activity Theory (Engestrom, 1999) was applied to the interview data and it is argued that this framework provides a useful way of understanding the complexity of placement experiences that the data imply.