

The Sandwich Placement Year within UK Undergraduate Programs and the Impact on Employability

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In spite of ongoing rumours of an estimated continuation of austerity, the higher education landscape is alive and well in the UK. As the UK government raised undergraduate student fees from £3000 to roughly £9000 per year in 2012, both student and parental expectations have increased. This, combined with nationwide university budget restraints, and a seemingly growing 'customer' attitude in higher education, we are certainly facing a very interesting time ahead. Currently EU and Home students have the same fees, with international student fees ranging from a few hundred pounds to a few thousand pounds more, dependant on the student's programme.

One of the key issues on the agendas of most university senior management boards is that of student employability. According to the Higher Education Academy (2015), the national body in the UK which champions teaching excellence, "Employability is important to higher education providers as there is increasing pressure to meet the expectations of all stakeholders, including alumni, employers, government bodies, parents, professional organisations, staff and students. This has driven the employability agenda and made it a priority in the 21st Century" (para 2).

To help with this, more and more universities are introducing a sandwich placement, or long internship, as a compulsory part of their undergraduate courses with the possibility of studying or working abroad as part of the experience. With the first two years of their course spent on campus, the third year is technically classed as the Sandwich Placement Year out in industry, with the student then returning to campus for the final year.

Having a sandwich placement year on their course has been a key criteria point for future students deciding on which institution to attend and academic course to take. For the first time they visit campus with their parents at Open Day events, one of their key concerns is linked to their future. They want to know what their course is going to bring them, particularly regarding future job prospects.

Support of the sandwich placement year varies from institution. At Bournemouth University, students have a designated Placement Development Advisor who serves as their primary link and support to the University. As an independent mentor, PDAs visit the student at their placement company, conducting two official reviews during their placement year. At other institutions, the student is monitored and supported via email and telephone while others may be followed by one of their academic tutors. Regardless of how they are supported by their home institution, the overwhelming answer when asked how they felt about their placement year is that it was one of the best experiences they had during their university degree. From experiencing such personal and professional growth, they feel more prepared for life after graduation as they have realised the importance of knowing not only what they want to do and head for, but also what they do not.

For those students who decide to go abroad to Europe for their placement experience, there is Erasmus funding available at those other institutions that belong to the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education scheme. This funding also supports a personal placement visit by their PDA. For those that go outside of Europe, there is additional funding available at Bournemouth University. This covers basic living expenses and therefore the PDA supports the student through two Skype or telephone reviews. While there is a very small percentage of students who do go abroad, there is a growing initiative to increase these numbers as it is seen as being important for UK graduates to be globally minded.

International students who have come to have routinely fed back that one of the reasons for choosing BU has been the compulsory sandwich placement year element of the course. While some of them choose opportunities within the UK for their sandwich placement, other students return to their home country to complete this requirement. In this case, the PDA supports the student with Skype or telephone reviews.

The impact of the sandwich placement experience has been evidenced by the National Student Survey, or the NSS. This survey, answered by students in their final year, is used by universities to inform their practice. By the NSS, universities have been able to identify the importance of the sandwich placement year to the student's overall university experience.

Due to the proven success of student employability initiatives, particularly those of the sandwich placement year, one can foresee a continued increase of UK universities offering academic courses which encompass a compulsory placement year. By continuing to meet the desired learning outcomes of their students, British universities will continue providing quality graduates ready for the world of industry.

Reference

Higher Education Academy [HEA]. (2015, November). *Framework for embedding employability in higher education*. Retrieved from <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/enhancement/frameworks/framework-embedding-employability-higher-education>