In-house, University-based work experience versus off-campus, work-experience

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Abstract

Purpose: To investigate students’ perceptions of the value, impact, benefits and disadvantages of internal (in-house, University-based work experience) versus external (off-campus, work experience placements).

Design/methodology/approach: Three focus groups, one consisting of students who had undertaken an external work placement experience off-campus at an employer’s workplace (n=6), one consisting of students who had undertaken an internal placement with a University-based employer (n=6), and a third mixed placement group (n=6, consisting of students who had undertaken both types), were formed. Focus group data were supplemented by interviews (n=3). Data were transcribed and analysed thematically.

Findings: Based on student perceptions, both types of work experience placement were thought to: enhance future employment; provide career insight; enable skill/experience acquisition and application; and be useful for building relationships. Internal placements were perceived to: be cost effective; enable students to be more closely supervised and supported; be good for relationship building between and within students/staff; be beneficial for increasing student attainment; and enable students to see the link between theory and practice more clearly. Internal placement work experience was perceived, however, to be restricted in terms of variety, and links with and perceptions of external stakeholders.

Research limitations: The study is limited in that it is based on the perceptions of students undertaking unique placements of integrated work experience within one faculty at one university.

Practical implications: When deciding on whether internal-in-house or external-off-campus work experiences are offered, consideration should be given to level of support, supervision, observation, and travel and time costs.
Originality/value: Original views of students regarding internal placements in-house work experience have been gathered, which can be used to inform placement choice in-course workplace practices.

Key words: work-based learning; placements; internships; employability; workplace experience
Introduction

Students who undertake relevant work experience, such as a work placement or internship, are not only more likely to receive a good degree (upper second or first class award), compared to those who do not (Brooks and Youngson, 2016; Jones et al., 2015; Mansfield, 2011; Patel et al., 2012), but are also more likely to gain competitive advantage in the job market (Harvey et al., 1998; Helyer et al., 2014; Langworthy and Turner, 2003; Tomlinson, 2008). Placements—work experience has been found to improve student progression and retention rates (Langworthy and Turner, 2003), and to motivate the student for further learning (Moore & Workman, 2011). Placements—Work experience also improves students’ perception of their academic experience (Kettis et al., 2013), which could impact on overall student satisfaction scores.

Reasons for why students undertake a placement—work experience, and the perceptions of their placement experience have been explored through qualitative research. One perceived benefit of placements—a work experience is that it provides insight into a particular industry or type of employment (Little and Harvey, 2006), to the extent that students are more able to identify with their intended profession (Kettis et al., 2013). Placements—Work experience is also thought to supplement learning (Little and Harvey, 2006), enable the student to see how theory is applied in practice (Bullock, Gould, Hejmadi and Lock, et al., 2009; Little and Harvey, 2006), and improve personal and transferable skills, such as communication, confidence, perseverance and empowerment (Bullock et al., 2009; Helyer et al., 2014).

Despite these reported advantages, there are several limitations concerning work experience—placements. Inappropriate placements—work places or not being able to place students with an appropriate employer are common challenges (Nduna, 2012). Students may be obliged to find placement work themselves, which presents problems such as students having to cold-call employers, and then having to face rejection (Aggett and Busby,
Bullock et al. (2009) found that some students were not organised or confident enough to arrange their own work placement experience. There are also cost implications for the University (Nduna, 2012), as well as cost implications for the student, since time spent in work-placement experience, which are generally unpaid, means that time in paid employment has to be reduced (Bullock et al., 2009). There is also considerable diversity of placement work experience. Students are, for instance, not always visited in the workplace by their University supervisor due to time and travel constraints of staff (Nduna, 2012).

Barriers for employers to providing placement-relevant work opportunities also exist, such as the costs and time associated with supervision and managing projects (Wilson, 2012). For these reasons, there has been a decline in the number of students who undertake external work experience at an employer’s workplace placements (Aggett and Busby, 2011; Nduna, 2012). Universities have, therefore, been considering alternatives to the traditional work placement experiences that occur offsite at the employers’ worksite, such as experiential learning, project-based learning (Nduna, 2012), extracurricular activities (Wilson, 2012), virtual placements (Cornelius et al., 2008), and community-based learning projects or ‘science shops’ (Gamble and Bates, 2011).

Internal (in-house work) placements may be one way of providing all the benefits of the traditional placement-off-campus work experience but without the resource implication, and the difficulties of trying to secure suitable placement workplace opportunities. Internal in-house placements work experience may also be suitable for students who are not confident enough to work externally. Internal in-house work placement opportunities are common in a number of settings, including medical, law, and sport, where in such situations, often a subsidised, commercial clinic or service is available on campus, often subsidised, which provides an opportunity for students to gain unpaid work placement experience.
There are certain disadvantages with internal work experiences. They decrease external employer engagement, reduce opportunities for knowledge transfer, and decrease other benefits associated with employer engagement and links with external stakeholders (Mansfield, 2011; Tallantyre, 2010). Nduna (2012), however, suggests that there was little or no proof of enhanced collaboration with industry as a result of external work experiences that occur at the employers’ workplace placements. A further disadvantage of internal in-house placements work experience is that students might not be able to develop their identity by observing a ‘real’ community of practice (Wenger, 1998). The advantages and disadvantages of work experience that occur internal-in-house, on campus versus external work that which occurs at an employer’s workplace placement warrants further investigation. The purpose of this study was, therefore, to investigate students’ perceptions of the value, impact, benefits and disadvantages of in-house, University-based work experience versus off-campus, worksite-based experience external versus internal work placements.
Methods

Undergraduate students within one faculty of one university in the United Kingdom were informed about the study through advertisement (email, virtual learning environment, and verbal announcement in lectures). Students who expressed an interest were contacted to ensure they met the inclusion criterion (undertaken a relevant placement work experience), and were invited to participate. All participants gave their written and informed consent having been fully informed of the study procedures. The study was approved by the University’s research ethics committee.

Students’ perceptions of the value, impact, benefits and disadvantages of in-house, University-based work experience versus off-campus, worksite-based work experience external versus internal work placements were explored through focus groups and interviews. All of the students who volunteered were studying for an undergraduate degree in sport and exercise, and were enrolled on a module, in which they were obliged to complete between 75 and 150 hours of unpaid work placement experience. The work experience was integrated within the module, and the module took place in the third year of the students’ study. There were approximately 100 students who met the inclusion criteria at the time of data collection, from which volunteers were obtained.

Three focus groups were formed: one group consisted of students who had undertaken an external work placement experience at a school or within a local council setting (n=6) that was external to the University; another group consisted of students who had undertaken an internal placement in-house work experience, which was within a commercial sports science support service (n=6); and a third, mixed placement group, consisted of students who had undertaken both external their work experience both with an employer external to the University (in a sports therapy or physiotherapy clinic or with a sports club) and internal with placements as part of a commercial sports therapy service that was an in-house, University-based setting (n=6). For the purposes of this paper, the three groups are
referred to as: 'in-house', 'off-campus', and 'mixed'. The term 'work experience' is used in this context to represent the learning from and application of knowledge and skills to a relevant working environment. The work experience was integrated into the learning of a module. Students used the term 'placement' since this is how the work experience was described in their module. Students referred also to 'internal placements', which were the in-house work experiences, and 'external placements' that were the off-campus work experiences. All participants were nearing the end or had recently finished their work experience. Focus group data were supplemented by interviews with two students who had undertaken the internal-in-house only placements work experience and one student who had undertaken the external-off-campus only placement work experience, giving a total of 21 participants. Interviews were felt to be necessary following focus group data collection as an attempt to achieve data saturation. The number of participants in each focus group followed recommendations of Carlson and Glenton (2011). Interviews and focus groups lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, and took place at a time and location convenient to the participants. The duration of the focus groups/interviews was such that they continued until the researcher felt that data saturation point had been reached. All participants were nearing the end or had recently finished their placement. Focus groups were chosen as the predominant method of data collection due to their ability to provide an understanding and deeper exploration of the views and ideas of the specific groups of participants under investigation (Wilkinson, 1998).

A topic guide was used to explore perceptions, which included the following: what students thought about their work experience placements generally (e.g., likes/dislikes and appropriateness); perceptions of the value and impact of the work experience placement on their learning experience, degree classification, job prospects and professional identity; and whether or not the placement work experience had allowed them to develop links with industry. At the end of the focus group/interview, the topic guide was checked to ensure that all areas had been covered. The topic guide reflected the broad research question. The
focus groups and interviews were conducted by an independent researcher, who was
recruited specifically because of her experience in focus group conduction and data
analysis. The researcher did not know any of the students, was outside of their programme
of study, and also had not been part of the study conception; these factors were put in place,
in order to reduce bias in how the focus groups/interviews were conducted, and also how
coding was carried out.

The focus groups and interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed to facilitate
analysis. Data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis (following procedures from
Braun and Clarke, 2006), allowing for exploration and interpretation of the relevant
placement issues more widely (Marks and Yardley, 2004). This method involved two of the
researchers reading transcripts independently and devising their own coding, key concepts
and themes. Codes and themes were based on the broad research question, which was on
the value, impact, benefits and disadvantages of the in-house and off-campus work
experiences. All data that met the broad research question were coded. Themes were
constructed based on meaningful and coherent patterns in the data, relevant to the research
question. The researchers then met to compare and contrast their findings, and to agree a
set of themes and subthemes. In reporting of the findings extracts, pseudonyms have been
used to protect identity. Extracts were selected if they were thought to reflect the themes and
subthemes particularly well.

A qualitative research design was used, since others had used such approaches to examine
students’ perceptions of work placements (e.g., Aggett and Busby, 2011; Bullock et al.,
2009), and because we wished to explore and examine the degree of commonality and
disparity of views, attitudes, beliefs, and experiences within and between the off-campus and
in-house students.
Findings and discussion

Perceptions of placements work experience were diverse, ranging from those who reported negative experiences (I haven’t learnt anything [Trevor, external off-campus placement group]), to very positive experiences (I loved it. Absolutely, completely love it, wish I could go back and do it all over again [Bob, mixed placement group, talking about his external-off-campus placement work experience]). These perceptions, however, did not depend on the placement type: location of the work experience (internal in-house versus external off-campus), but were more to do with the particular individual’s placement work experience.

Six main themes, which were common to both placement types of work experience, emerged from the data: future employment; career in sight; skills and experience; support; time; and relationships.

Future employment

Regarding future employment, there were two subthemes: enhancing employer perceptions and career links. All participants thought that their placement work experience would ‘look good’ on their curriculum vitae, and would make them seem more employable (enhancing employer perceptions).

...when you leave Uni, there’s a lot of talk about how a degree’s not enough anymore...I think that the more work experience you do, the more volunteer stuff you do, then you’re definitely going to help other people’s views...when it comes to looking for a job [Jenson, internal in-house placement]

This perception was apparent even when the placement work experience was deemed lacking in other areas:
...just having the experience...even though it might not be a positive experience, it's experience [Trevor, external-off-campus placement]

In the mixed placement group, it was felt that the external-placement work experience that took place at the employer's worksite would enhance employer perceptions more so than that undertaken the internal in-house placement:

...I think overall external placement will probably make me look better when you go for a job after uni[versity]...than just the Internal [Becca, mixed placement]

According to previous researchers (Harvey et al., 1998; Langworthy and Turner, 2003), placements undertaking a work experiences are is more likely to lead to students gaining a competitive advantage when it comes to gaining employment. Based on the current data, the competitive advantage could be because placements the work experience enhances the perceptions of employers, this point being supported by Eagle et al. (2008), who reported that placements work experience placements were generally viewed as favourable by employees. In the current study, although students thought that their placement experience, irrespective of placement type where it took place (internal in-house versus external off-campus) and suitability, enhanced employer perceptions, there was a tendency for external-off-campus placements work experience, when being compared to internal in-house placements work experience, to be thought of as enhancing employer perceptions to a greater extent.

The mixed placement and external-off-campus students valued the links to the external employers, who were external to the University (subtheme, career links):

...it's not what you know, it's who you know. [Bob, commenting on his external-off-campus placement work experience].
If you go in with the right attitude and everything there is a chance that you can get employed at the end. [Jason, external off-campus placement]

For those students who were in the internal in-house placement group, career links were still valued. This particular placement work experience involved external clients coming into the University to use the service; students felt that links with external clients in this way were valuable for their career. In the external off-campus placement group, it was stated by one of the participants that the links were of no value, since this particular student was not intending to go back to the particular placement workplace, owing to a negative experience. It seems, therefore, that career links are important in a placement work experience if they are perceived to be of value, but are not dependent on placement location type where the work experience takes place, the latter finding contradicting observations by others (Mansfield, 2011; Tallantyre, 2010), who reported that internal in-house placements work experiences might decrease links with employers.

Career insight

Students in all three groups talked about career insight, within which emerged two subthemes: gaining real-world experience, and reinforcing and re-evaluating career aspirations. All students, regardless of whether they were doing internal in-house, external off-campus or mixed placement types of work experience, found that the placement work were was useful in gaining real-world experience (…you can’t really gain that through sitting in a classroom [Dave external off-campus placement]).

By gaining this experience, students’ career aspirations were either reinforced or re-evaluated. In other words, some students found that the placement work experience had made them realise that they did not want to continue with their previously intended
profession, whereas for others, the placement work experience had confirmed that their career choice was the right one. Again, these observations were independent of placement type:

I think you’ve got to understand what exactly they do before you can kind of make a decision on what it is that you’re dead set on, ‘cos once you commit to something you commit to something. [Jenson, internal in-house placement]

It’s making you see whether you want to get involved in it after. ‘Cos if you don’t enjoy it after this, you won’t enjoy it going into it, whereas if you still enjoy it after this, you’re probably gonna carry on. [Dave, external off-campus placement]

…it sort of confirms to you that it is what you wanna do…instead of realising sort of afterwards, ‘cos it’s a big risk doing three years and then realising it’s not what you wanna do, but doing the placement helps confirm that. [Paige, mixed placement]

These opinions and perceptions regarding career insight reinforce those found by Little and Harvey (2006), although in the current study, unlike that of Kettis et al. (2013), students did not say that the placement work experience had helped them specifically to identify with their intended profession, or developed their identity as a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Gaining career insight and reinforcing and re-evaluating career aspirations were, however, important aspects of all placement types of work experience, irrespective of location, in the current study.

Skills and experiences

For all three groups, students identified a number of skills and experiences. Subthemes were: job-specific skills, putting into practice, confidence, variety, and getting a better grade.
Apart from communication skills, which were identified by all students regardless of the location of their work experience type, the job-specific skills identified were unique to the particular employment type, such as teaching-related skills, and specific technical skills. All students identified these skills as being an advantage of placements as a work experience.

Confidence was highlighted as an important skill acquired, irrespective of the location of the work experience:

...one of the biggest barriers you have to overcome doing your placement is definitely confidence. [Becca, mixed group, placement talking about external off-campus placement work experience]

...it makes you more confident...knowing that you can actually perform what you say, so your confidence helps you progress. [Sophie, internal in-house placement]

Similar to the findings of others (Bullock et al., 2009; Helyer et al., 2014), where students perceived placements as work-based learning experiences and internships as improving their confidence, and their personal and transferable skills, students in the current study, regardless of placement type work experience location, highlighted job-specific skills and confidence as being important skills acquired as a result of their placement work experience.

The subtheme, putting into practice, was about how students were able to put their skills and experiences that they had learned in the classroom into practice 'in the field'. Such comments were particularly apparent among the internal in-house placement group of students, possibly because the internal in-house work experience placement (which was a...
sports science support service) had been specifically set up for this purpose. Students
remarked how they had learnt and understood more in-depth information by doing this
internal in-house placement experience than they had in their normal, scheduled teaching
sessions (laboratories and lectures):

...I feel like I've learnt a lot more in the clinic than in the labs [Rob, internal-in-house]

I think I've learnt more in them few hours than I did in those labs [Jackie, internal-in-
house]

Students, who did were in the external off-campus placements only group, also commented
on how they were able to put their skills into practice:

...it's like behaviour management...you won't really understand in terms of someone
telling you what to do, you can only learn that through it actually happening. [Dave, external-off-campus placement]

These viewpoints support those of other researchers, regarding the value of placements
work experiences in supplementing learning, and in enabling students to see how theory is
applied in practice (Bullock et al., 2009; Little and Harvey, 2006). Although it seemed that the
internal-in-house placement students could see the link between learning and practice more
clearly, all students valued this aspect of their placement work experience, regardless of
placement type where the work took place.

Regarding variety, there was a tendency for internal placement students who had done their
work experience in-house to say that the skills they acquired were not varied (...we always
come and do the same sort of testing [Bruce, internal-in-house placement]; ...in clinic, you
just do a load of massages and that’s it. [Becca, mixed placement talking about internal-in-
house work experience], owing perhaps to a lack of equipment (…within a professional sport they obviously have the budget for bigger medical facilities. [Bob, mixed placementgroup]). A lack of variety, was also mentioned, however, by those who were doing external-off-campus placements work experience, owing to the placement work experience being restricted in some other way, such as it being on the same day each week, having to work with the same group of children (for those on work experience placements in a school), or not being allowed to do all aspects of the job (…on external er I couldn’t go pitch side ‘cos I didn’t have a first aid qualification. [Dan mixed placement group commenting on the external-off-campus work experienceplacement]). The mixed placement group of students appreciated the variety that both the internal-in-house and external-off-campus placements work experience gave them (…you do need to experience both sides [clinic and sport] [Becca, mixed placement]. Variety, whether positive or negative, could, therefore, be dependent on placement work experience locationtype.

Most students felt that the placement work experience enabled them to get a better grade, particularly highlighted by students in the internal-in-house placement group (I’ve been getting better marks and percentages on my assignments. [Jenson]). The placement work experience was part of the students’ study, which contributed directly to their grade, which students acknowledged. These findings confirm support observations made by other researchers (Brooks and Youngson, 2016; Mansfield, 2011; Patel et al., 2012), in that students undertaking a work placement are more likely to obtain a good degree. There were, however, also some reservations regarding enhancement of grades, since the placement work experience was felt to be, in some instances, so time consuming that it was actually taking the students away from other aspects of their study. Further follow-up research on whether the internal-in-house and external-off-campus placements work experiences do, in fact, lead to a better degree classification could be undertaken.
Support

Subthemes identified under the theme of support included: finding placements work experience; level of supervision; and observation.

Finding placements work experience was unique to those who were doing external off-campus placements work. The mixed group specifically identified the struggles that they had had in finding an appropriate placement employer:

...if you can’t find a placement but you’re looking every single day, you’ve then got more pressure just to basically take a placement anywhere, although maybe you don’t wanna go there. [Bob, mixed placement group talking about external off-campus placements work experience]

Some of the students, for whom off-campus placements work experience had been found, said that they wished that they had been able to find their own placement employer, since they were not happy with the placement on work place experience that they had been given.

Inappropriate placements work placements and internships or not being able to find a suitable work placements have been identified in previous research as a limitation to external off-campus placements experiences (Aggett and Busby, 2011; Bullock et al., 2009; Nduna, 2012). Finding a placement work experience was not an issue for those who were only doing an working internal in-house placement.

Students in all groups talked about the level of supervision they received on their placement work experience. For internal in-house placement students, the fact that tutors were there to support them was viewed positively:

First day of a job you’re gonna be in the deep end either way aren’t you, whereas this is sort of middle ground still. [Chuck, internal in-house placement]
...I think when you go in, you're a little bit nervous because...you're worried that you won't know how to perform a certain task but you've got the back up from whoever's in the lab helping you...so you progress at your own speed. [Sophie, internal-in-house placement]

...if you haven't done something quite right on placement, you can do it again [Alice, mixed placement-group talking about internal-in-house placement work experience]

In the group of students who could compare their internal-in-house and external-off-campus placement work experience, students seemed to appreciate the level of supervision of the internal-in-house placement work experience, but also felt that the external-off-campus placement work experience put them under pressure, which was thought to be both a positive and a negative thing:

...you've got the real world professionals watching you do everything, so there's a bit more pressure to get it right the first time....rather than internal, there's always someone there to help you. [Dan, mixed placement]

...I think when you're working internally you can get a bit of a safety net where if you don't know anything, you can just pop up and ask the supervisor, but when you're in that [external-off-campus] environment, if you don't know it, you have to go away and learn it....I feel an external placement is better because you don't have that safety net, there's a more pressurised environment. [Bob, mixed placement]

In the external-off-campus placement group, the level of supervision varied according to the particular placement work experience, either being viewed as inappropriate to the extent that the placement host employer did not know the student was coming on placement to the
workplace, to those where organisation and level of supervision were thought to be good.

The level of supervision, therefore, might be dependent on the student, and how much support they feel they need. Providing internal placements—in-house work experience may help those students in the early part of their University life, or may help students who lack the confidence to be ‘thrown into the deep end’.

Regarding the subtheme of observation, there were both benefits and barriers identified. Some students appeared to have benefitted from observing only (rather than doing):

Even though I’ve sat back and observed a lot, I have learnt stuff like...behaviour management. [Trevor, external-off-campus placement]

...I still learnt a lot just by shadowing. [Paige, mixed placement group talking about her external-off-campus placement work experience]

Other students wanted to have a more active role:

...it’s kind of annoying...just sitting in the corner just watching, [Jess, external-off-campus placement]

These benefits and barriers seemed to be specific to the placement work experience and student preferences, rather than whether or not the work took place in-house or off-campus the type of the work experience.

Cost

For the theme of cost, subthemes identified were: time and travel. The placement work experience being viewed negatively, in terms of how it meant that their time was away from
studying, or was too time consuming in general, was identified by all students, regardless of placement typework experience location:

I could be doing my dissertation right now [Bruce, internal-placement-in-house]

...you have to be the one to decide, right, which day am I gonna lose to do my placement and then work basically everything around that. [Becca, mixed placement]

The internal-placement-in-house work experience, however, was viewed more positively, in that time was less of an issue, due to the placement work being more flexible (as the internal placement-in-house work experience was specifically designed to accommodate students when they were free on their timetable).

Travelling to and from the placement-work experience was specific to the external-off-campus placement students only, and was viewed both positively and negatively:

...it takes an hour and a half to get to the training ground and two hours to get to the stadium but I do it with ease now because I love what I do. [Bob, mixed placement group talking about his external-placement-off-campus work experience]

...getting there has been a bit of a nightmare... [Trevor, external-off-campus placement]

Travel time was understandably not an issue for those students undertaking internal-in-house work experience placement.
These observations on time and travel identified in the current study support those of others, (Bullock et al., 2009; Nduna, 2012), although were not always viewed as negative, and were less of an issue for internally placed students.

Relationships

A final theme that emerged from the data was about relationships, which included the subthemes of social side and tutor relationships. The internal placement students, who were undertaking in-house work experience, talked about the social side of the placement experience, where they were able to chat with others in the course (...I got to talk to a few people on my course that I wouldn't normally talk to. [Jenson]). Students who had done undertaken external-off-campus work experience placements also talked about the social side: (...it's just like the team spirit and the team banter. I love it. [Dan, mixed placement talking about external experience placement]).

Unique to internal placements, was the subtheme of tutor relationships. Students commented on how they had been able to build good, positive relationships with their tutors with whom they worked (...you get to see like a different side of them [Rob, internal placement])., which transferred, it was highlighted, into the classroom.

Conclusions

Based on student perceptions, placements work, regardless of whether they were internal in-house or external off-campus:

- Enhanced future employment because:
students felt that employers were more likely to view their placements work favourably, irrespective of the placement experience;

placements work provided career links with valued external employers and individuals;

Gave students career insight, since:

real-world experience was gained, and

the placement work provided students with an opportunity to reinforce or re-evaluate their career aspirations;

Allowed students to gain and put into practice a variety of skills and experiences (such as job-specific skills, confidence, communication skills, and gave them the skills needed to enhance their grades), and

Allowed students to build relationships.

Work experience, regardless of whether in-house or off-campus, was perceived by the students who took part in this study to enhance future employment, not only because they felt that employers were more likely to view their work experience as favourable, but also because the work experience provided career links with valued external employers and individuals. Students also felt that the work experience, regardless of its location, provided them with career insight via real-world experience, through which they were able to re-affirm or re-evaluate their career aspirations. Students thought that both in-house and off-campus work experience allowed them to gain and put into practice a variety of skills and experiences (such as job-specific skills, confidence, and communication skills), enhanced their university grades, and allowed them to build relationships.

Issues (viewed positively and negatively) that arose for both internally-placed in-house and externally-placed off-campus students work experience included: the level of support in finding a placement work; the level of supervision during the placement work experience; the
amount of observation versus ‘hands-on’ experience involved in the placement work experience; and travel and time costs.

When comparing internal in-house and external off-campus placements work experiences, based on the data collected in the current study (which was limited to students undertaking a limited number of placements work experiences that was integrated, short in duration (75 to 150 hours) and specific to one faculty of one university), internal in-house placements work experience were deemed advantageous in that students did not have to find their own placements work, and was deemed cost effective in terms of travel and possibly, to some extent, time. In addition, internal in-house placements work experience allowed students to feel supported, and allowed them to develop relationships with their tutors and other students. The internally in-house placed students specifically identified how their placements work experience enabled them to see clearly the link between theory and practice. External Off-campus work experiences placements were, however, deemed to ‘look’ better to the employer than were internal in-house experiences, but if the internal in-house placements work experience involved some kind of external clientele, then career links were believed sufficient. A lack of variety seemed to occur with internal placements work experience, but also with external-off-campus placements experiences, which were restricted by, for instance, time.

The study is limited in terms of sample size and cohort. There was, however, an appropriate size of participants in each focus group, and the focus group participants were segmented, following recommendations regarding qualitative data collection (e.g., Carlson and Glenton, 2011). Sampling was from one cohort of students (those who were studying for an undergraduate degree in sport and exercise), who met the inclusion criteria, which also restricted, to some extent, the number of focus groups that were achievable, as well as the generalizability of the findings. Although the study is limited in these aspects, based on the findings of the students in the current study, further evaluation of in-house and off-campus
work experience is warranted, since perceptions of their relative value revealed some differences. That said, there may have been other reasons for the differences that were found between the in-house and off-campus work experiences. For instance, the in-house group was unique in that the student knew (or knew of) the employer, which may have influenced students' perceptions. In addition, all students volunteered for the study, which may have influenced findings, since students may have volunteered for their own motives, such as wishing to share their frustrations or conversely, to express their gratitude over their work placement experience. Undertaking a study on a larger and more diverse cohort of students, and attempting to control for potential confounding variables, is required.

Practical implications and recommendations

Based on the findings of the current study, recommendations are to offer placement when offering work experience opportunities for all students, but consideration should be given to level of support, supervision, observation, and travel and time costs. Internal in-house placements work experiences should be encouraged, since, in the current study, they were perceived to be as beneficial as external off-campus work experiences, having the added advantages that they were cost effective, allowed students to be more closely supervised and supported, were good for relationship building between and within students/staff, and, if set up specifically to enable students to put theory into practice, were beneficial for increasing student attainment. However, if offering internal in-house work placements, tutors should be mindful, however, that variety, and links with and perceptions of external stakeholders may be compromised when offering in-house work experiences that are similar to those investigated in the current study. Further research on the value, impact, advantages and limitations of off-campus and in-house work experience could be undertaken, by not only investigating perceptions of a greater number and diversity of students, but also by gathering quantitative data regarding the value of such work experience for degree and employment success.
References


Abstract

Purpose: To investigate students’ perceptions of the value, impact, benefits and disadvantages of in-house, University-based work experience versus off-campus, work-experience.

Design/methodology/approach: Three focus groups, one consisting of students who had undertaken work experience off-campus at an employers’ workplace (n=6), one consisting of students who had undertaken work experience in-house with a University-based employer (n=6), and a third mixed group (n=6, consisting of students who had undertaken both types), were formed. Focus group data were supplemented by interviews (n=3). Data were transcribed and analysed thematically.

Findings: Based on student perceptions, both types of work experience were thought to: enhance future employment; provide career insight; enable skill/experience acquisition and application; and be useful for building relationships. Work experience that occurred in-house was, in addition, perceived to: be cost effective; enable students to be more closely supervised and supported; be good for relationship building between and within students/staff; be beneficial for increasing student attainment; and enable students to see the link between theory and practice more clearly. In-house work experience was, however, deemed to be restricted in terms of variety, and links with and perceptions of external stakeholders.

Research limitations: The study is limited in that it is based on the perceptions of students undertaking unique types of integrated work experience within one faculty at one university.

Practical implications: When deciding on whether in-house or off-campus work experiences are offered, consideration should be given to level of support, supervision, observation, and travel and time costs.

Originality/value: Original views of students regarding in-house work experience have been gathered, which can be used to inform in-course workplace practices.
1. Key words: work-based learning; placements; internships; employability; workplace experience
Introduction

Students who undertake relevant work experience, such as a work placement or internship, are not only more likely to receive a good degree (upper second or first class award), compared to those who do not (Brooks and Youngson, 2016; Jones et al., 2015; Mansfield, 2011; Patel et al., 2012), but are also more likely to gain competitive advantage in the job market (Harvey et al., 1998; Helyer et al., 2014; Langworthy and Turner, 2003; Tomlinson, 2008). Work experience has been found to improve student progression and retention rates (Langworthy and Turner, 2003), and to motivate the student for further learning (Moore and Workman, 2011). Work experience also improves students’ perception of their academic experience (Kettis et al., 2013), which could impact on overall student satisfaction scores.

Reasons for why students undertake work experience, and the perceptions of their experience have been explored through qualitative research. One perceived benefit of a work experience is that it provides insight into a particular industry or type of employment (Little and Harvey, 2006), to the extent that students are more able to identify with their intended profession (Kettis et al., 2013). Work experience is also thought to supplement learning (Little and Harvey, 2006), enable the student to see how theory is applied in practice (Bullock et al., 2009; Little and Harvey, 2006), and improve personal and transferable skills, such as communication, confidence, perseverance and empowerment (Bullock et al., 2009; Helyer et al., 2014).

Despite these reported advantages, there are several limitations concerning work experience. Inappropriate work places or not being able to place students with an appropriate employer are common challenges (Nduna, 2012). Students may be obliged to find work themselves, which presents problems such as students having to cold-call employers, and then having to face rejection (Aggett and Busby, 2011). Bullock et al. (2009) found that some students were not organised or confident enough to arrange their own work placement experience. There are also cost implications for the University (Nduna, 2012), as
well as cost implications for the student, since time spent in work-placement experience, which is generally unpaid, means that time in paid employment has to be reduced (Bullock et al., 2009). There is also considerable diversity of work experience. Students are, for instance, not always visited in the workplace by their University supervisor due to time and travel constraints of staff (Nduna, 2012). Barriers for employers to providing relevant work opportunities also exist, such as the costs and time associated with supervision and managing projects (Wilson, 2012). For these reasons, there has been a decline in the number of students who undertake work experience at an employer’s workplace (Aggett and Busby, 2011; Nduna, 2012). Universities have, therefore, been considering alternatives to the traditional work experiences that occur offsite at the employers’ worksite, such as experiential learning, project-based learning (Nduna, 2012), extracurricular activities (Wilson, 2012), virtual placements (Cornelius et al., 2008), and community-based learning projects or ‘science shops’ (Gamble and Bates, 2011).

In-house work experience may be one way of providing all the benefits of a traditional off-campus work experience but without the resource implication, and the difficulties of trying to secure suitable workplace opportunities. In-house work experience may also be suitable for students who are not confident enough to work externally. In-house work opportunities are common in a number of settings, including medical, law, and sport. In such situations, often a subsidised, commercial clinic or service is available on campus, which provides an opportunity for students to gain unpaid work experience.

There are certain disadvantages with in-house work experiences. They decrease external employer engagement, reduce opportunities for knowledge transfer, and decrease other benefits associated with employer engagement and links with external stakeholders (Mansfield, 2011; Tallantyre, 2010). Nduna (2012), however, suggests that there was little or no proof of enhanced collaboration with industry as a result of work experiences that occur at the employers’ workplace. The advantages and disadvantages of work experience that
occur in-house, on campus versus that which occurs at an employer’s workplace warrants further investigation. The purpose of this study was, therefore, to investigate students’ perceptions of the value, impact, benefits and disadvantages of in-house, University-based work experience versus off-campus, worksite-based experience.
Methods

Undergraduate students within one faculty of a university in the United Kingdom were informed about the study through advertisement (email, virtual learning environment, and verbal announcement in lectures). Students who expressed an interest were contacted to ensure they met the inclusion criterion (undertaken a relevant work experience), and were invited to participate. All participants gave their written and informed consent having been fully briefed on the study procedures. The study was approved by the University's research ethics committee.

Students’ perceptions of the value, impact, benefits and disadvantages of in-house, University-based work experience versus off-campus, worksite-based work experience were explored through focus groups and interviews. All of the students who volunteered were studying for an undergraduate degree within sport and exercise, and were enrolled on a module, in which they were obliged to complete between 75 and 150 hours of unpaid work experience. The work experience was integrated within the module, and the module took place in the third year of the students’ study. There were approximately 100 students who met the inclusion criteria at the time of data collection, from which volunteers were obtained.

Three focus groups were formed: one group consisted of students who had undertaken their work experience at a school or within a local council setting (n=6) that was external to the University; another group consisted of students who had undertaken in-house work experience, which was within a commercial sports science support service (n=6); and a third, mixed group, consisted of students who had undertaken their work experience both with an employer external to the University (in a sports therapy or physiotherapy clinic or with a sports club) and with a commercial sports therapy service that was an in-house, University-based setting (n=6). For the purposes of this paper, the three groups are referred to as: ‘in-house’, ‘off-campus’, and ‘mixed’. The term ‘work experience’ is used in this context to represent the learning from and application of knowledge and skills to a relevant working
environment. The work experience was integrated into the learning of a module. Students used the term ‘placement’ since this is how the work experience was described in their module. Students referred also to ‘internal placements’, which were the in-house work experiences, and ‘external placements’ that were the off-campus work experiences. All participants were nearing the end or had recently finished their work experience. Focus group data were supplemented by interviews with two students who had undertaken the in-house only work experience and one student who had undertaken off-campus only work experience, giving a total of 21 participants. Interviews were felt to be necessary following focus group data collection as an attempt to achieve data saturation. The number of participants in each focus group followed recommendations of Carlson and Glenton (2011). Interviews and focus groups lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, and took place at a time and location convenient to the participants. The duration of the focus groups/interviews was such that they continued until the researcher felt that data saturation point had been reached. Focus groups were chosen as the predominant method of data collection due to their ability to provide an understanding and deeper exploration of the views and ideas of the specific groups of participants under investigation (Wilkinson, 1998).

A topic guide was used to explore perceptions, which included the following: what students thought about their work experience generally (e.g., likes/dislikes and appropriateness); perceptions of the value and impact of the work experience on their learning, degree classification, job prospects and professional identify; and whether or not the work experience had allowed them to develop links with industry. At the end of the focus group/interview, the topic guide was checked to ensure that all areas had been covered. The topic guide reflected the broad research question. The focus groups and interviews were conducted by an independent researcher, who was recruited specifically because of her experience in focus group conduction and data analysis. The researcher did not know any of the students, was outside of their programme of study, and also had not been part of the
study conception; these factors were put in place, in order to reduce bias in how the focus
groups/interviews were conducted, and also how coding was carried out.

The focus groups and interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed to facilitate
analysis. Data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis (following procedures from
Braun and Clarke, 2006), allowing for exploration and interpretation of the relevant
placement issues more widely (Marks and Yardley, 2004). This method involved two of the
researchers reading transcripts independently and devising their own coding, key concepts
and themes. Codes and themes were based on the broad research question, which was on
the value, impact, benefits and disadvantages of the in-house and off-campus work
experiences. All data that met the broad research question were coded. Themes were
constructed based on meaningful and coherent patterns in the data, relevant to the research
question. The researchers met to compare and contrast their findings, and to agree a set of
themes and subthemes. In reporting of the extracts, pseudonyms have been used to protect
identity. Extracts were selected if they were thought to reflect the themes and subthemes
particularly well. A qualitative research design was used, since others had used such
approaches to examine students' perceptions of work placements (e.g., Aggett and Busby,
2011; Bullock et al., 2009), and because we wished to explore and examine the degree of
commonality and disparity of views, attitudes, beliefs, and experiences within and between
the off-campus and in-house students.
Findings and discussion

Perceptions of work experience were diverse, ranging from those who reported negative experiences (I haven’t learnt anything [Trevor, off-campus]), to very positive experiences (I loved it. Absolutely, completely love it, wish I could go back and do it all over again [Bob, mixed group, talking about his off-campus work experience]). These perceptions, however, did not depend on the location of the work experience (in-house versus off-campus), but were more to do with the particular individual’s experience.

Six main themes, which were common to both types of work experience, emerged from the data: future employment; career insight; skills and experience; support; time; and relationships.

Future employment

Regarding future employment, there were two subthemes: enhancing employer perceptions and career links. All participants thought that their work experience would ‘look good’ on their curriculum vitae, and would make them seem more employable (enhancing employer perceptions).

...when you leave Uni, there’s a lot of talk about how a degree’s not enough anymore...I think that the more work experience you do, the more volunteer stuff you do, then you’re definitely going to help other people’s views...when it comes to looking for a job [Jenson, in-house]

This perception was apparent even when the work experience was deemed lacking in other areas:
...just having the experience...even though it might not be a positive experience, it's
experience [Trevor, off-campus]

In the mixed group, it was felt that the work experience that took place at the employer's
worksite would enhance employer perceptions more so than that undertaken in-house:

...I think overall external placement will probably make me look better when you go for
a job after uni[versity]...than just the internal [Becca, mixed]

According to previous researchers (Harvey et al., 1998; Langworthy and Turner, 2003),
undertaking a work experience is more likely to lead to students gaining a competitive
advantage when it comes to gaining employment. Based on the current data, the competitive
advantage could be because the work experience enhances the perceptions of employers,
this point being supported by Eagle et al. (2008), who reported that work-experience
placements were generally viewed as favourable by employees. In the current study,
although students thought that their work experience, irrespective of where it took place (in-
house versus off-campus) and suitability, enhanced employer perceptions, there was a
tendency for off-campus work experience, when being compared to in-house work
experience, to be thought of as enhancing employer perceptions to a greater extent.

The mixed and off-campus students valued the links to employers, who were external to the
University (subtheme, career links):

...it's not what you know, it's who you know. [Bob, commenting on his off-campus
work experience].

If you go in with the right attitude and everything there is a chance that you can get
employed at the end. [Jason, off-campus]
For those students who were in the in-house group, career links were still valued. This particular work experience involved external clients coming into the University to use the service; students felt that links with external clients in this way were valuable for their career. In the off-campus group, it was stated by one of the participants that the links were of no value, since this particular student was not intending to go back to that particular workplace, owing to a negative experience. It seems, therefore, that career links are important in a work experience if they are perceived to be of value, but are not dependent on where the work experience takes place, the latter finding contradicting observations by others (Mansfield, 2011; Tallantyre, 2010), who reported that in-house work experiences might decrease links with employers.

Career insight

Students in all three groups talked about career insight, within which emerged two subthemes: gaining real-world experience, and reinforcing and re-evaluating career aspirations. All students, regardless of whether they were doing in-house, off-campus or mixed types of work experience, found that the work was useful in gaining real-world experience (…you can’t really gain that through sitting in a classroom [Dave off-campus]). By gaining this experience, students’ career aspirations were either reinforced or re-evaluated. In other words, some students found that the work experience had made them realise that they did not want to continue with their previously intended profession, whereas for others, the work experience had confirmed that their career choice was the right one. Again, these observations were independent of placement type:

I think you’ve got to understand what exactly they do before you can kind of make a decision on what it is that you’re dead set on, ‘cos once you commit to something you commit to something. [Jenson, in-house]
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It's making you see whether you want to get involved in it after. 'Cos if you don't enjoy it after this, you won't enjoy it going into it, whereas if you still enjoy it after this, you're probably gonna carry on. [Dave, off-campus]

...it sort of confirms to you that it is what you wanna do...instead of realising sort of afterwards, 'cos it's a big risk doing three years and then realising it's not what you wanna do, but doing the placement helps confirm that. [Paige, mixed]

These opinions and perceptions regarding career insight reinforce those found by Little and Harvey (2006), although in the current study, unlike that of Kettis et al. (2013), students did not say that the work experience had helped them specifically to identify with their intended profession. Gaining career insight and reinforcing and re-evaluating career aspirations were, however, important aspects of all types of work experience, irrespective of location, in the current study.

Skills and experiences

For all three groups, students identified a number of skills and experiences. Subthemes were: job-specific skills, putting into practice, confidence, variety, and getting a better grade.

Apart from communication skills, which were identified by all students regardless of the location of their work experience, the job-specific skills identified were unique to the particular employment type, such as teaching-related skills, and specific technical skills. All students identified these skills as being an advantage of a work experience.

Confidence was highlighted as an important skill acquired, irrespective of the location of the work experience:
one of the biggest barriers you have to overcome doing your placement is definitely confidence. [Becca, mixed group, talking about off-campus work experience)

...it makes you more confident....knowing that you can actually perform what you say, so your confidence helps you progress. [Sophie, in-house]

Similar to the findings of others (Bullock et al., 2009; Helyer et al., 2014), where students perceived work-placement experiences and internships as improving their confidence, and their personal and transferable skills, students in the current study, regardless of work experience location, highlighted job-specific skills and confidence as being important skills acquired as a result of their work experience.

The subtheme, putting into practice, was about how students were able to put their skills and experiences that they had learned in the classroom into practice ‘in the field’. Such comments were particularly apparent among the in-house group of students, possibly because the in-house work experience (which was a sports science support service) had been specifically set up for this purpose. Students remarked how they had learnt and understood more in-depth information by doing this in-house experience than they had in their normal, scheduled teaching sessions (laboratories and lectures):

...I feel like I’ve learnt a lot more in the clinic than in the labs [Rob, in-house]

I think I’ve learnt more in them few hours than I did in those labs [Jackie, in-house]

Students, who were in the off-campus group, also commented on how they were able to put their skills into practice:
...it’s like behaviour management...you won’t really understand in terms of someone
telling you what to do, you can only learn that through it actually happening. [Dave,
off-campus]

These viewpoints support those of other researchers, regarding the value of work
experiences in supplementing learning, and in enabling students to see how theory is
applied in practice (Bullock et al., 2009; Little and Harvey, 2006). Although it seemed that the
in-house students could see the link between learning and practice more clearly, all students
valued this aspect of their work experience, regardless of where the work took place.

Regarding variety, there was a tendency for students who had done their work experience
in-house to say that the skills they acquired were not varied (...we always come and do the
same sort of testing [Bruce, in-house ]; ...in clinic, you just do a load of massages and that’s
it. [Becca, mixed placement talking about in-house work experience]), owing perhaps to a
lack of equipment (...within a professional sport they obviously have the budget for bigger
medical facilities. [Bob, mixed group]). A lack of variety, was also mentioned, however, by
those who were doing off-campus work experience, owing to the work experience being
restricted in some other way, such as it being on the same day each week, having to work
with the same group of children (for those on work experience in a school), or not being
allowed to do all aspects of the job (...on external er I couldn’t go pitch side ‘cos I didn’t have
a first aid qualification. [Dan mixed group commenting on the off-campus work experience]).
The mixed group of students appreciated the variety that both the in-house and off-campus
work experience gave them (...you do need to experience both sides [clinic and sport]
[Becca, mixed]. Variety, whether positive or negative, could, therefore, be dependent on
work experience location.
Most students felt that the work experience enabled them to get a better grade, particularly highlighted by students in the in-house group (*I've been getting better marks and percentages on my assignments.* [Jenson]). The work experience formed part of the students’ study, which contributed directly to their grade, which students acknowledged. These findings support observations made by other researchers (Brooks and Youngson, 2016; Mansfield, 2011; Patel et al., 2012), in that students undertaking a work placement are more likely to obtain a good degree. There were, however, also some reservations regarding enhancement of grades, since the work experience was felt to be, in some instances, so time consuming that it was actually taking the students away from other aspects of their study. Further follow-up research on whether the in-house and off-campus work experiences do, in fact, lead to a better degree classification could be undertaken.

**Support**

Subthemes identified under the theme of support included: finding work experience; level of supervision; and observation.

Finding work experience was unique to those who were doing off-campus work. The mixed group specifically identified the struggles that they had had in finding an appropriate employer:

*...if you can’t find a placement but you’re looking every single day, you’ve then got more pressure just to basically take a placement anywhere, although maybe you don’t wanna go there.* [Bob, mixed group talking about off-campus work experience]

Some of the students, for whom off-campus work experience had been found, said that they wished that they had been able to find their own employer, since they were not happy with the workplace that they had been given. Inappropriate work placements and internships or
not being able to find a suitable work placement have been identified in previous research as a limitation to off-campus experiences (Aggett and Busby, 2011; Bullock et al., 2009; Nduna, 2012). Finding a work experience was not an issue for those who were working in-house.

Students in all groups talked about the level of supervision they received on their work experience. For in-house students, the fact that tutors were there to support them was viewed positively:

First day of a job you’re gonna be in the deep end either way aren’t you, whereas this is sort of middle ground still. [Chuck, in-house]

…I think when you go in, you’re a little bit nervous because…you’re worried that you won’t know how to perform a certain task but you’ve got the back up from whoever’s in the lab helping you…so you progress at your own speed. [Sophie, in-house]

…if you haven’t done something quite right on placement, you can do it again [Alice, mixed group talking about in-house work experience]

In the group of students who could compare their in-house and off-campus work experience, students seemed to appreciate the level of supervision of the in-house work experience, but also felt that the off-campus work experience put them under pressure, which was thought to be both a positive and a negative thing:

…you’ve got the real world professionals watching you do everything, so there’s a bit more pressure to get it right the first time….rather than internal, there’s always someone there to help you. [Dan, mixed]
...I think when you’re working internally you can get a bit of a safety net where if you don’t know anything, you can just pop up and ask the supervisor, but when you’re in that [off-campus] environment, if you don’t know it, you have to go away and learn it....I feel an external placement is better because you don’t have that safety net, there’s a more pressurised environment. [Bob, mixed]

In the off-campus group, the level of supervision varied according to the particular work experience, either being viewed as inappropriate to the extent that the employer did not know the student was coming to the workplace, to those where organisation and level of supervision were thought to be good. The level of supervision, therefore, might be dependent on the student, and how much support they feel they need. Providing in-house work experience may help those students in the early part of their University life, or may help students who lack the confidence to be ‘thrown into the deep end’.

Regarding the subtheme of observation, there were both benefits and barriers identified. Some students appeared to have benefitted from observing only (rather than doing):

Even though I’ve sat back and observed a lot, I have learnt stuff like...behaviour management. [Trevor, off-campus]

...I still learnt a lot just by shadowing. [Paige, mixed group talking about her off-campus work experience)

Other students wanted to have a more active role:

...it’s kind of annoying...just sitting in the corner just watching, [Jess, off-campus]
These benefits and barriers seemed to be specific to the work experience and student preferences, rather than whether or not the work took place in-house or off-campus.

Cost

For the theme of cost, subthemes identified were: time and travel. The work experience being viewed negatively, in terms of how it meant that their time was away from studying, or was too time consuming in general, was identified by all students, regardless of work experience location:

*I could be doing my dissertation right now* [Bruce, in-house]

*...you have to be the one to decide, right, which day am I gonna lose to do my placement and then work basically everything around that.* [Becca, mixed]

The in-house work experience, however, was viewed more positively, in that time was less of an issue, due to the work being more flexible (as the in-house work experience was specifically designed to accommodate students when they were free on their timetable).

Travelling to and from the work experience was specific to the off-campus students only, and was viewed both positively and negatively:

*...it takes an hour and a half to get to the training ground and two hours to get to the stadium but I do it with ease now because I love what I do.* [Bob, mixed group talking about his off-campus work experience]

*...getting there has been a bit of a nightmare...* [Trevor, off-campus]
Travel time was understandably not an issue for those students undertaking in-house work experience.

These observations on time and travel identified in the current study support those of others, (Bullock et al., 2009; Nduna, 2012), although were not always viewed as negative, and were less of an issue for students undertaking in-house work experience.

Relationships

A final theme that emerged from the data was about relationships, which included the subthemes of social side and tutor relationships. The students, who were undertaking in-house work experience, talked about the social side, where they were able to chat with others in the course (...I got to talk to a few people on my course that I wouldn't normally talk to. [Jenson]). Students who had undertaken off-campus work experience also talked about the social side: (...it's just like the team spirit and the team banter. I love it. [Dan, mixed]).

Unique to in-house work experience, was the subtheme of tutor relationships. Students commented on how they had been able to build good, positive relationships with their tutors with whom they worked (...you get to see like a different side of them [Rob, in-house]), which transferred, it was highlighted, into the classroom.

Conclusions

Work experience, regardless of whether in-house or off-campus, was perceived by the students who took part in this study to enhance future employment, not only because they felt that employers were more likely to view their work experience as favourable, but also because the work experience provided career links with valued, external employers and
individuals. Students also felt that the work experience, regardless of its location, provided them with career insight via real-world experience, through which they were able to re-affirm or re-evaluate their career aspirations. Students thought that both in-house and off-campus work experience allowed them to gain and put into practice a variety of skills and experiences (such as job-specific skills, confidence, and communication skills), enhanced their university grades, and allowed them to build relationships.

Issues (viewed positively and negatively) that arose for both in-house and off-campus work experience included: the level of supervision during the work experience; the amount of observation versus ‘hands-on’ experience involved in the work experience; and travel and time costs.

When comparing in-house and off-campus work experiences, based on the data collected in the current study (which was limited to students undertaking a work experience that was integrated, short in duration (75 to 150 hours) and specific to one faculty of one university), in-house work experience was deemed advantageous in that students did not have to find their own work, and was deemed cost effective in terms of travel and, to some extent, time. In addition, in-house work experience allowed students to feel supported, and allowed them to develop relationships with their tutors and other students. The in-house students specifically identified how their work experience enabled them to see clearly the link between theory and practice. Off-campus work experiences were, however, deemed to ‘look’ better to the employer than were in-house experiences, but if the in-house work experience involved some kind of external clientele, then career links were believed sufficient. A lack of variety seemed to occur with in-house work experience, but also with off-campus experiences, which were restricted by, for instance, time.

The study is limited in terms of sample size and cohort. There was, however, an appropriate size of participants in each focus group, and the focus group participants were segmented,
following recommendations regarding qualitative data collection (e.g., Carlson and Glenton, 2011). Sampling was from one cohort of students (those who were studying for an undergraduate degree in sport and exercise), who met the inclusion criteria, which also restricted, to some extent, the number of focus groups that were achievable, as well as the generalizability of the findings. Although the study is limited in these aspects, based on the findings of the students in the current study, further evaluation of in-house and off-campus work experience is warranted, since perceptions of their relative value revealed some differences. That said, there may have been other reasons for the differences that were found between the in-house and off-campus work experiences. For instance, the in-house group was unique in that the student knew (or knew of) the employer, which may have influenced students’ perceptions. In addition, all students volunteered for the study, which may have influenced findings, since students may have volunteered for their own motives, such as wishing to share their frustrations or conversely, to express their gratitude over their work placement experience. Undertaking a study on a larger and more diverse cohort of students, and attempting to control for potential confounding variables, is required.

Practical implications and recommendations

Based on the findings of the current study, when offering work experience opportunities for students, consideration should be given to level of support, supervision, observation, and travel and time costs. In-house work experiences are recommended, since, in the current study, they were perceived to be as beneficial as off-campus work experiences, having the added advantages that they were cost effective, allowed students to be more closely supervised and supported, were good for relationship building between and within students/staff, and, if set up specifically to enable students to put theory into practice, were beneficial for increasing student attainment. Tutors should be mindful, however, that variety, and links with and perceptions of external stakeholders may be compromised when offering in-house work experiences that are similar to those investigated in the current study. Further research on the value, impact, advantages and limitations of off-campus and in-house work
experience could be undertaken, by not only investigating perceptions of a greater number and diversity of students, but also by gathering quantitative data regarding the value of such work experience for degree and employment success.
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