



International work experience

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Course details

Course title - Applied Social Sciences

Level - Undergraduate

Year - 2

Module title - Work & Professional Development

Discipline/Subject areas - Social Policy

Context

Funded Project

This case study is one of four outputs created as the result of a funded project entitled 'thinking, learning and 'doing' international work experience'.

Case study 1 describes how a team of colleagues at Sheffield Hall University added an international stream to a core level 2 degree module.

Case studies 2 – 4 review some of the teaching and learning tools implemented by colleagues delivering the international stream. These include short international experience opportunities; desk based international experience and an optional reflective diary.

Definition of terms

Internationalisation: A process whereby students are exposed to international issues, processes and influences, and are given the opportunity to experience those directly by going abroad or indirectly by staying in Sheffield.

Work: A complex package combining some or any combination of the following: direct work experience, reflections on types of working and work environments, reflection and study.

Activity details

What we did

Fifteen students elected to join the international stream of a Work & Professional Development module. Of these, three students went overseas, whilst the others remained at Sheffield Hallam (SHU). Staff at SHU had identified a college in New York where SHU students could visit. SHU students went overseas for one week and were accompanied by SHU staff. SHU students took with them projects they needed to carry out in order to fulfil the

module's assessment requirements. These projects were concerned with work-related activity (i.e. the students themselves became researchers, or, the topic under scrutiny was either

something they had prior work experience in or was an area that they were interested in developing as a possible career area). Students were not given 'placements', but rather embedded within the culture of the college and introduced to American students. There was a possibility of some voluntary work towards the end of the week for one of the students.

Why we did it

We were keen to expose students to a variety of forms of internationalisation, from course content to making them think about work and their own professional development in an international context. This module carried the Personal Development Plan for level 5, and so for the students on this particular stream, they would be expected to reflect on their own employability skills and professional development in an international context – be that by doing some work-related activity abroad or to research into topics that linked to their own work interests in an international way.

The New York college was regarded as a comparable institution to SHU (in terms of student populations and types and modes of study) and thus one where SHU students could relate to

American students, and where student experiences could be meaningfully exchanged. The New York college had set up a week's timetable of study activity for the SHU students, including meeting with individuals from the equivalent of UK student reps / students union. The SHU students had projects they were interested in pursuing; the trip overseas was to provide an opportunity to gather an international dimension and to give them a 'real' opportunity to ask questions and capture thoughts from fellow students abroad. It was hoped that not only would the SHU students benefit from being embedded in the culture of the college for this duration, but that also linkages would be strengthened between the two institutions for future possibilities (including staff and student exchanges).

What we wanted to achieve

Our aim was to provide an international experience by placing these students in a different country. Whilst there, we wanted them to be able to construct an international dimension to their understanding of 'work'

A short description of what we did

During the first semester there was a deliberate decision not to overload students with too much information and content about internationalisation in lectures and seminars but instead to facilitate gradual understanding of both work and work within the international context. Consequently at the end of semester 1 the students were required to compile a project or topic area which was linked to their own work interests and /or related to a more theoretical issue about work. Both of these had to be embedded within an international context. This work was assessed. Then in semester two students were required to produce a reflective report on their experiences for assessment.

The three students and two staff from SHU flew out to New York at Easter time 2008. The college had provided a 5-day timetable of study-related activity for the three students. Two of the three projects that the students were focusing on looked at gathering American student perceptions on particular topics. During the week, therefore, interviews, questionnaires and informal chats took place in order to gather this data. For these students, the work experience was that of 'being' researchers. The third project was concerned with developing a comparative understanding of approaches to homelessness, and involved, at the end of the week, a brief visit to a soup kitchen in New York. For this student, the opportunity to offer her help was welcomed, and provided a direct comparison with her UK-based

voluntary work. The space around the formal timetable was filled with travelling to/from the hotel to the college, as well as some sightseeing. These activities were regarded by the SHU students and staff as valuable experiences in their own right. During the week, the SHU students were requested to reflect on their experiences.

What worked well

- Embedding the UK students into the college provided them with a rich experience (seeing, doing and participating). Their experience of internationalisation was direct and real
- The UK students got the opportunity to develop their project topic by talking directly to international peers. This deepened their understanding of the topics they were researching into and made more meaningful the comparative nature of their study
- The UK students' work experience 'as researchers' was positive in that they developed interview and questionnaire skills, as well as having to adapt and develop skills to glean information in less formal ways, sometimes having to address on the hoof the issue of cultural difference (e.g. in language and/or in context)
- Giving an opportunity for one student to do some voluntary work (albeit briefly) gave a real and very immediate international comparison
- Internationalising the curriculum is feasible in this direct way: students can explore and reflect on social science topics through asking direct questions and partaking in 'real'
- conversations with international peers
- Structuring the time spent abroad (through the timetable devised by the college) offered some boundaries for the students in terms of what they were expected to achieve
- The benefits of direct and real conversations was reciprocated for the US students, thus developing an international awareness that worked both ways

Problems and/or issues

- Prior to the overseas experience, students seemed to compartmentalise their different experiences (studying, paid work, voluntary work etc) rather than seeing them as
- interlinked parts of a greater whole. This made it hard for them to create a project topic that brought together their interests and their own work activities.
- It seems that students very much want to have 'proper' work experiences aboard (in the sense of being 'placed' in a job for a couple of weeks). However, to offer this to any number of students overseas should not to be underestimated (finance, Health and Safety, risk assessment, curriculum infrastructure etc).
- Students possibly needed more taught content on international topics – this could be delivered via virtual learning environments, as well as face to face in seminars or lectures. However, this was seen as potentially problematic as the students struggled with formulating their own projects, thus making the provision of relevant and useful content at appropriate times a challenge.
- The issue of how 'work experience' is defined and perceived can be a real problem. Possibly greater clarification earlier on in the module (by staff as well as students) is needed over what could be meant by 'work' and 'professional development' and whether (and how) this differed from 'work experience'. Student expectations of 'work experience' therefore need to be carefully managed

What students thought about it

Positives

- These students appreciated the opportunity to go abroad and valued the immediacy of the international experience

- The trip was a positive learning experience, giving them a real sense of comparison between their own student experiences and that of their international peers
- Friendships have been made with international peers
- These students were able to 'pull back' and fully appreciate their own situations and be able to understand more about other cultures

Negatives

- These 3 students didn't feel as though what they had done overseas was 'real' work experience, even though they knew before departing that - certainly for two of them – 'work' would be defined in the context of information gathering. Their reflection on their time was that they would have preferred to have been 'placed' in some form of work shadowing or voluntary opportunity. For the third student, however, there was disappointment that the voluntary work opportunity occupied such a small proportion of her time abroad.
- The trip needed to have been much longer than one week in order for the experiences to be more meaningful. Equally, it was a common view that if students were to have been placed in 'real' work experiences, then this would have had to have been for much longer (possibly 6 weeks) for there to be any tangible work-related benefits
- There was consensus here that work experience should have meant something along the lines of a 'placement' (as opposed to being 'a researcher' on a project, which was simply regarded as an extension of 'being a student').
- They would have welcomed more 'build-up' time to develop relationships with peers and to prepare the ground more effectively before travelling abroad. It was felt that the time spent abroad would also have been more productive if this had happened.
- The timetable provided by the college, whilst helpful in some respects, could have been tailored more to the topic areas that the SHU students were interested in. It could also have included some work shadowing opportunities tied in to the project areas under investigation
- The timetable didn't leave much time for the students to pursue their own projects.
- The timing of the trip proved difficult in terms of it being close to submission dates: students would have preferred the trip to have taken place between the semesters
- The opportunity to do more than a short day's worth of volunteering would have been beneficial to the student in order to develop professional relationships and to begin to get a comparative feel of how different systems work
- Students felt that they needed to be taught more 'real' facts about internationalisation: they felt that this wasn't a 'proper' module because of the relatively few lectures and seminars.

Key messages

giving students an opportunity to go abroad to 'feel and see' a different country has many benefits, both curricular and social, and immediate and longer term

work experience needs to be clearly defined and understood

finances and curricular infrastructure permitting, students would benefit greatly from being placed in a voluntary or work experience setting overseas for a couple of weeks

Related documents or links

Hudson B. & Todd, M. (2000) (eds.) *Internationalising the Curriculum in Higher Education: reflecting on practice*. Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University Press.

Palmer, M. (2002) 'On the pros and cons of volunteering abroad', *Development and Practice*, vol. 12 (5) 637-647.

Darvill, G. and Ashford, A. (2006) *Recruitment and Employability issues in social policy degree courses in Higher Education* (SWAP report)

Case Study 2: Desk based students and international issues

Case Study 3: International work experience (abroad)

Case Study 4: Using reflective diaries within the context of a work and professional development module

Any other comments

The international stream no longer runs as part of this module. It was felt that it was better to embed the international agenda through all streams rather than 'bolting on' as a stream in its own right. Offering a stream raised the hopes of too many students that they would automatically go abroad. Thoughts are now moving towards getting students to write a clear rationale (from whichever stream they are in) about why they would want to go abroad. We are now thinking, through our strengthened links with the New York college, about an increase in international mobility by planning staff and student exchanges.



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