



A study of the impact of work placements and social background on graduate outcomes within
Salford Business School

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1.0 Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify the benefits work placements have on student outcomes and encourage more students to make the most of the opportunities available. Graduate outcomes are still a very topical discussions within Higher Education, and the concept of value for money for students and the wider community, under the scrutiny of The Office for Students, is a key factor related to future funding.

The theoretical debates about self-selection identified that some students progressed onto a graduate role without completing a Professional Placement Year, but the literature appears to support the notion that work placements are beneficial to all students in developing their employability skills and enhancing their career development.

A number of studies (Smith et al, 2018; Atfield, 2021; BIS, 2016; Brookes & Youngson, 2016) highlight the benefits of doing a work placement, and how some students have the cultural, social and psychological capital to help them make an informed decision related to doing a Professional Placement Year, or not. For others who don't see the benefits and have lower levels of capital, a conceptual framework has been produced, with a view to working with all stakeholders, internal and external, to provide students with the required level of skills and attributes that will make them employable.

Employability has become an important aspect of higher education and this report aims to address the question related to their being limited knowledge and understanding of the impact student backgrounds have on their decision-making process. The research highlights the importance of embedding employability within the provision, as a module and not as an extra-curricular activity, with a view to encouraging all students to progress, irrespective of their starting points.

2.0 Introduction

Universities are under increasing pressure to enhance student employability, due to external factors, such as rising enrolment figures and governmental pursuit on economic returns on completing a degree (Sin et al, 2019). Cawood et al. (2019) note that “universities are expected to produce graduates with future-orientated capabilities that align with changes to globalisation and digitalisation” (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2022).

Graduate employability has become a key subject of debate in UK Higher Education (Maxwell et al, 2008), with two key aspects; one relating to employability as ‘job-getting’ - the ability of the graduate to secure a job after graduation; the second relating to the development of attributes, qualities and skills considered to be essential by employers that help graduates to secure a graduate job (Minocha, et al., 2017). Key UK government reports on HE have emphasised the role universities have in addressing graduate employability, to meet employer needs and to support future growth, highlighting the importance of developing graduate skills and experience. (Minocha, Hristov, & Reynolds, 2017) – shifting graduate employability towards a demand driven as opposed to the more conventional supply-led approach (Leitch, 2006)

Another key element related to employability lies with students themselves; some being more employable than others due to having some form of work experience or indeed job prospects related to their chosen area of study (Minocha, et al., 2017). A second key theme relates to the range of qualities and characteristics employers look for to recruit and support career progression and lifelong learning (Miller, Baggart, & Newton, 2013)

The Government's Department for Business, Innovation and Skills concluded that whatever the definition of employability skills is put in place, there is a need to ensure that the definition is aligned with employer expectations (BIS, 2011)

The third theme is the commitment of universities to integrate employability themes across curricula and pedagogy (Minocha, Hristov, & Reynolds, 2017). Yorke and Knight (2006) contended that a full spectrum of pathways to embedding employability in the curriculum features “a number of overlapping approaches”:

- Embedding employability in the core curriculum
- Using work-based curriculum components
- Adopting employability-related modules
- Work based learning in parallel with curriculum

Though the first three are suspected to have the greatest potential for enhancing employability, Yorke & Knight (2006) argue that the last two are more applicable. Within the authors Accounting and Finance Directorate within Salford Business School, employability is embedded into all levels of provision; Level 4 Accounting, Employability and Commercial Awareness, Professional Development Level 5 and Reflective Practice and Career Development at level 6 (SBS, 2023).

According to Kornelakis & Patrakaki (2020, p. 290), “developing employability skills within HE, as part of the learning process, has become increasingly important and can be attributed to the growing marketisation of the education sector, labour market trends and shifts in public policy”. Graduate unemployment as a result of a more competitive labour market, alongside associated skills gaps noted by employers, has made the graduate market increasingly difficult for many students.

Tomlinson (2008) noted that human capital theory views participation in education and training as an investment that yields both social and private returns, whereas Ashton & Green (1996) noted the social benefits of being a highly skilled and flexible workforce, alongside the private returns related to individual earnings over time and career progression opportunities. Higher education “being seen as a shared investment between the individual graduates and the state, with both benefitting from continued expansion” (Tomlinson, 2008, p.50).

According to a report by Atfield et al (2021) work placements during undergraduate study tend to link positively to student outcomes. However the report does go on to say that though the associations appear to be positive, little research has been done on the problem of self-selection. Positive graduate outcomes might be related to the students ability and that even without the placement the outcome would be the same.

There is limited knowledge and understanding on the impact student backgrounds have on their decision-making process, around seeking work placement opportunities. This study will focus on Salford Business School’s alumni who successfully completed a work placement, against those students with similar academic outcomes who didn’t, and measure the impact they felt it had in securing a graduate position. Furthermore, in line with suggestions made by Smith et al (2018) who stated the social background of the students, whether they were ‘first in the family’ graduates, their parental social class, with reference to job roles and student aspirations, should be taken into account.

For the purposes of this report, and use of secondary data, a spreadsheet containing students who graduated in 2016/17 and 2017/18, produced by Salford University’s management

information systems, will analyse those students who went on a professional placement year, or not, their degree and social-economic classifications and Polar quintile. Primary research will be conducted to assess students starting points; A level, BTEC, Access or other and whether they were the first students in their family to attend university.

The aim of the research is to conduct a study that puts forward recommendations on how best to support all students into graduate jobs: through work placements or not, and provide the necessary skills and support, that improve overall graduate outcomes within Salford Business School. To meet the aims, the objectives are detailed below:

1. To evaluate current graduate outcomes data from 2016/17 and 2017/18
2. To examine the impact work placements, have on graduate recruitment
3. To assess the social background of students who progressed from Salford Business School into employment
4. To identify the key behavioural and motivational factors that lead to successful graduate outcomes and employment
5. To put forward recommendations on how best to support ALL students in the pursuit of a graduate position

The following chapter will provide an in-depth review of relevant literature

3.0 Literature Review

The literature review will highlight research that has taken place, on the impact work placements have on graduate outcomes and employment, and how acquired skills and behaviours enable students to progress directly into employment.

3.1 The impact of work placements

According to Jackson & Tomlinson (2022, p.1120) that despite “considerable literature on tools, resources and approaches to developing student employability through curriculum based, co-curricular or extra-curricular practices, there is no real evidence on how they enhance students employability from a students perspective (Tymon, 2013). Jackson & Tomlinson (2022) go on to say that this is surprising given employability outcomes attract performance indicators.

In a study conducted by Smith et al. (2018) on the impact work placements had on computer graduates employment prospects, factors influencing students ability to secure work placements, including recognition of the benefits gained from completing a placement, and parental experiences of higher education. The study found that graduates had benefited from work experience financially, earning more than students who didn't embark on a work placement

From a students point of view, placements provide valuable real-life learning experiences that improve their employment prospects and inform them of their future career plans (Smith et al, 2018).

On that basis the secondary data relates to students who graduated in 2016/17 and 2017/18 without the additional constraints on students in later years; at the height of the pandemic and working from home, many students on the Professional Placement Year were unable to get the full experience of the benefits available of working in an office environment.

Given that work placements, according to (BIS, 2016), improve students employability prospects, what about the students themselves. What impact does the environments in which they live or socio-economic background have on the choices they make.

3.2 Human capital

Useem & Karabel (1986) considered human capital theory within higher education, stating three distinctive types of human capital onto its students: social, cultural and scholastic. Donald et al (2019, p.600) suggested that "social capital should include, amongst other things, contacts, parents, educational establishments, friends, and memberships/affiliations".

3.3 Self-selection and attainment

As noted by Atfield et al. (2021) undergraduate work placements tend to be linked to positive outcomes for students, supported by a broad range of research activities. The report goes on to say that if students' ability is positively linked to outcomes, it might be that the more able students are inclined to undertake work placements, the positive outcomes might be more to do with students' ability rather than the work placement: they would have achieved the outcome anyway. A few studies tried to address the self-selection issue, though the correlation between the two was lower, the link was still a positive one.

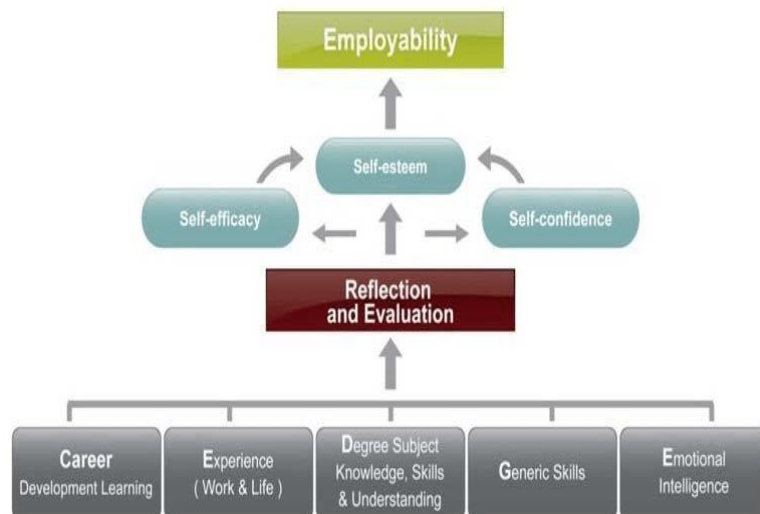
3.4 The Career Edge Model

The CareerEdge model by Dacre-Pool (2020) (Figure 3.2) was first introduced 13 years ago as a model to support graduate employability, highlighting the importance of each component

and its relationship with other elements of the model. The article that introduced the CareerEdge model “was the result of an in-depth, rigorous research into the concepts of graduate employability “. (Dacre-Pool, 2020, p. 51). At the center of the CareerEdge model is the ‘D’ for the degree subject knowledge, skills and understanding, an essential element of employability development. According to Dacre-Pool (2020) Career development Learning, a career management and development plan, is important in preparing students well for job applications and interviews, but a great deal of important work takes place before graduation.

The model is used to support the five components on the lower tier, and enables students to assess, develop and reflect on these experiences, leading to the acquirement of the higher levels of self-efficacy, self-confidence, and self-esteem: crucial links to employability.

Figure 3.2 CareerEdge model



Source: Dacre-Pool, (2020)

Developing self-awareness, alongside guidance on opportunities available to students in helping them to make career decisions, essential for a successful life beyond university, that help secure and retain occupations they will find fulfilling. Students also need support in

presenting themselves in digital spaces such as LinkedIn and other social media platforms preparing them for modern-day recruitment processes, including video interviews.

The Emotional intelligence element of the model has become and an essential part of employability development and included in a number of personal specification and job descriptions. Work carried out by Dacre-Pool (2020) in 2007 and 2011, demonstrated the importance of EI and how it can be taught to enhance students' level of confidence in their EI ability. "A recent meta-analysis has shown a clear, positive association between EI and academic performance, supporting a growing consensus among educators, researchers and policy makers, of its importance for wellbeing and future workplace success for students" (Dacre-Pool, 2020, p. 8)

An additional feature of the model that overlaps with EI is the concept of Cultural Intelligence, defined as an individual's capability to function and manage effectively in culturally diverse settings (Ang & VanDyne, 2009) an essential skill in today's diverse workplaces and global society.

At the next level of the model, Reflection and Evaluation, where students are given the opportunities to reflect on and evaluate their employability learning experiences by using reflective logs, journals, or portfolios. These deep learning experiences have the potential to increase levels of Self-Efficacy, Self-Confidence, and Self Esteem, vital to employability development.

Closely related to the three S's and EI, is resilience and a growing concern about students' mental health and wellbeing, dealing with the set back on rejection of applications, or when making mistakes within the workplace. By reflecting on these experiences and being guided to learn from them, students can see mistakes and challenges are part of everyday life. These types of experiences and challenges help build self-efficacy, self-confidence, self-esteem, and resilience to be recalled when future challenges arise.

Since its original publication in 2007, the CareerEdge model has been used in a number of educational establishments, such as Nottingham Trent University to help staff understand and teach employability development (Dacre-Pool, 2020). David Eade, (2019) Director of Employability at Nottingham Trent stated that "as the future of work develops at an even faster pace, we cannot hope to prepare our graduates for jobs that in all likelihood have not yet been invented. Our ambition is to equip graduates to be adaptable in a changing world and secure successful and fulfilling futures for themselves, then the CareerEdge is probably more relevant now that it has ever been" (Dacre-Pool, 2020, p. 55). Moreover, Wujema et al (2022) noted

that the CareerEdge model was an effective tool when investigating the factors influencing undergraduate employability in six universities in North-East Nigeria, especially related to self-efficacy. Furthermore, Yawson and Yamoah (2023) noted that the model is a good tool to be used for employability development with students for assessing and measuring employability, though they argued that entrepreneurship knowledge should be added, to develop an entrepreneurial mindset.

The lower elements of the model are essential for employability development as is the importance of reflection in the development of the three S's, especially in the current economic climate and uncertainty of the precarious job market. (Dacre-Pool, 2020)

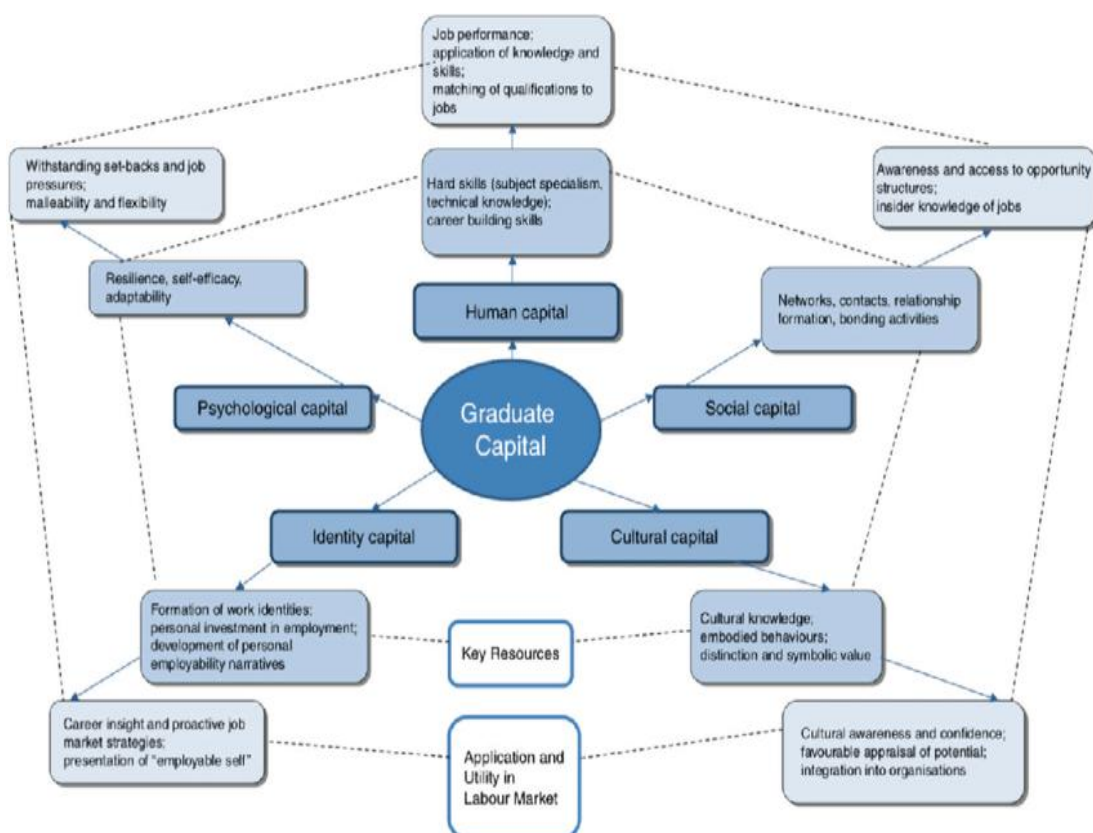
From the research noted above, arguably, it seems clear of the importance of embedding assessed employability provision within the curriculum. In an attempt to address these issues, the level 4 module entitled Accounting, Employability and Commercial Awareness has been implemented at SBS. The module has two forms of assessment: one being a group presentation related to the recruitment processes of accounting firms, key elements of CV's and LinkedIn profiles and job opportunities available within Greater Manchester. The presentation is recorded using the functions available on PowerPoint: sound and video. The second assessment is an individual 2000-word report where students provide a critical reflection of their own skills, using a Skills Wheel, to identify areas for development, and produce a detailed action plan of what they need to do to improve their employability skills. Throughout the module, guest speakers including alumni, share their own experiences from education to employment (and obstacles along the way) and graduate recruitment personnel from accounting firms within Greater Manchester explain their recruitment processes and internship and work placement opportunities available: the module is timetabled and students are required to attend.

Alongside the provision, an employer-led advisory group has been formed to help support students' progress with reference to their employability needs: work placements, job opportunities and to provide subject specific guest speakers. A LinkedIn group of accounting alumni has also been developed to support current students in their own learner journey from education into employment.

3.5 Graduate Capital Model

Tomlinson (2017) introduced the Graduate Capital Model (Figure 3.3) noting that graduate capital consists of Human, Social, Cultural, Identity and Psychological and that there are “two important dimensions for each: the key resources related to each and how they are utilised when graduates enter the job market.” (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 340)

Figure 3.3 Graduate Capital Model



Source: Tomlinson, (2017)

- Human capital refers to the knowledge and skills graduates have acquired, and instil wider technical knowledge, that is embedded and utilised in higher-end professional job roles.
- Social capital refers to building on those existing human capital skills that have been acquired, by building relationships and expanding networks to facilitate graduates access and awareness of job opportunities available, and how best to exploit them.

- Cultural capital refers to the formation of “culturally valued knowledge, dispositions and behaviours that are aligned to the workplaces graduates seek to enter.” (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 343) Moreover, research by Bathmaker et al (2013) and Burke (2015) on graduates from different socio-economic backgrounds is the different understanding of the field rules, as well as the knowledge and confidence in being able to negotiate them.
- Identity capital to the level of personal investment and time graduates make in order to develop their future career and employability; forming a personal narrative and being able to articulate one aligned to the jobs roles they seek. How students/graduates present themselves to prospective employers through CV's, LinkedIn profiles and other forms of autobiographical practices, highlighting lived experiences relative to employment value.
- Psychological capital refers to how graduates respond and adapt to inevitable career challenges they will no doubt experience. Koen et al (2012) noted that the more graduates can internalise the significance of managing their responses to career challenges, the more equipped they will become in managing adverse situations

The ONS (2019) reported that around 40% of UK graduates are working in positions that fall below graduate skills and knowledge, a mismatch between graduate skills and the demands of the employer (Tomlinson, et al., 2022). Maccabe (2023) notes that the graduate capital model is short term and static in nature and focusses more on the exchange value of graduate labour over long-term employment fulfilment. The author goes on to say that Human Capital theory has been criticised in the literature due to its lack of realism (Baptiste, 2001; Tan, 2014; Marginson, 2019) and for regarding education as a commodity to satisfy business demands, implying that people with more education are always more productive than people with less education.

As noted earlier in the report, some students self-select onto a programme, as they do at SBS by enrolling onto the PPY, recognising the benefits of work placement and experience; others don't. The various models noted above attempt to address key factors related to employability with a view to ensuring students are ready for the world of work. However, there are students who need more support and encouragement, who lack confidence and feeling of worth. As noted by Maccabe (2023) some students when analysing the components of the various models as weaknesses in their own skills and attributes, not as areas for development. On that basis, those elements of the models that focus on enhancing students levels of confidence will be used, as they have a significant impact on the other areas of each model

As noted by Smith et al (2018) students who complete a placement year improve their chances of obtaining employment on graduation, though not all students manage to secure a placement, due to the competitive nature of the process, but also, as pointed out by Atfield et al (2021), there is little knowledge about the impact of students backgrounds related to certain levels of psychological and identity capital. Many students don't have access to a role model who has worked in the accounting sector, and lack confidence in their ability to secure a placement.

There is limited knowledge and understanding on the impact student backgrounds have on their decision-making process, around seeking work placement opportunities. This study will focus on Salford Business School's alumni who successfully completed a work placement, against those students with similar academic outcomes who didn't, and measure the impact they felt it had in securing a graduate position. Furthermore, in line with suggestions made by Smith et al (2018) who stated the social background of the students, whether they were 'first in the family' graduates, their parental social class, with reference to job roles and student aspirations, should be taken into account.

By focussing on the elements of the various models noted above, related to enhancing student aspirations and levels of confidence, the following conceptual framework will be used to help students in their pursuit of work placements, enhancing their employability skills on graduation, thus improving graduate outcomes data for SBS.

With reference to Human Capital, many of the students are very capable academically and do have the technical skills required to progress,

3.6: Proposed Conceptual Framework

The proposed conceptual framework links the behavioural and social aspects on the various models noted above with a view to supporting those students who lack confidence, don't self-select as a result of their social backgrounds and identity.

The first column is related to the personality traits within SBS students, that can hold them back from seeking job opportunities available, due to their inherent Psychological, Identity and Cultural Capital, alongside the key characteristics and methods students need in order to help them address negative traits in a developmental fashion.

By reflecting then evaluating on the current levels of employability learning experiences, students have the potential to bring about increases in their levels of self-efficacy, confidence and esteem, all vital components in employability development (Dacre-Pool, 2020)

Figure 3.4 Proposed Conceptual Framework

Personality traits	Key characteristics	Student development
Psychological	<i>Managing the inevitable career challenges students will have with reference to rejection and tenacity</i>	<i>Resilience and never giving up attitude</i>
Identity	<i>The way in which you understand yourself and describe who you are to others.</i>	<i>Presentation and investing in you to achieve in what you aspire to</i>
Cultural	<i>Students' backgrounds, socio-economic groups and understanding of the field rules</i>	<i>Empathy and teamworking</i>
Self:		
Efficacy	<i>Lower levels of self-efficacy related to the perception of not being able enough</i>	<i>Seeking opportunities available that help secure employment</i>
Confidence	<i>A sense of one's own competence and capability</i>	<i>Know your strengths and weaknesses and have a positive mindset</i>
Esteem	How we value and perceive ourselves	Being worthy and capable

Source: The Author (2023)

The conceptual framework will be applied in a way to address students negative perceptions of themselves, when seeking work placement opportunities available, whilst taking note of the benefits they provide.

For Salford Business School to improve graduate outcomes for all learners, by encouraging more students to make the most of the opportunities available, such as work placements and embedding employability provision within the curricula, it is vitally important that all stakeholders, internal and external, support students in the pursuit of their chosen careers; from a graduate outcomes point of view for SBS and governmental bodies, through to a pipeline of talent for employers. For SBS and other universities, it is important to note it is also their responsibility to help support that transition.

3.7 Theory of Change

According to Reinholz & Andrews (2020, p.2) “the process of theory of change allows a team to reach a consensus on its underlying assumptions, that are codified in a product (usually a diagram).” The authors go on to say that the process seeks to understand the conditions under which something works, in this case embedding employability successfully within SBS provision, and encouraging more students to take a PPY. A visual representation helps to provide clarity of thought between the preconditions, long-term outcome, and the interventions of the underlying context.

Moreover, The Center for Theory of Change (2023) notes that the model will present an initiative in terms of the resources needed, the activities and address the short- and long-term outcomes, whilst helping to clarify goals to other stakeholders. One of the drawbacks of the model being getting all team members on board and to make the initiative work, including the students!!!

Apart from embedding employability with SBS provision, what other steps can be taken to encourage students to make the most of the opportunities available.

3.7.1 Nudge Theory

The evidence suggest that work placements are beneficial to all parties; students, universities and prospective employers, however as noted by Fowlie & Forder (2020), for some students the benefits work placements can offer don't seem to be so attractive. This hesitancy has resulted in a decline in the uptake of students taking work placements over recent years (Fowlie & Forder, 2020).

A key element of nudge theory is not based on force or coercion to make changes, but by providing choices, known as choice architects, as a way to designing interventions that are easy to avoid but will increase the likelihood of making a choice that is in line with the intended outcome (Fowlie & Forder, 2020); a nudge. Proponents against nudge theory argue that “scant attention is given to the variation in the capability of individuals to make decisions (Wells, 2020) or Roberts (2018, p. 1047) who pointed out that “structural barriers and social constraints mean that we are not equally autonomous or nudge-able and that choice architects assumes the ability to choose”.

Despite some criticisms, nudge theory has received positive responses, including Johnson et al (2012) who maintained the nudging can help remove barriers and Damgaard & Nielsen (2018) who argued that nudges can bring about the greatest effects on the behavioural barriers of targeted intervention.

The Theory of Change and Nudge Theory will be explored in greater detail later within the report, alongside recommendations made.

3.8 Summary

This chapter evaluates the benefits work placements provide students when seeking employment after graduation. It was followed by exploring the impact self selection has on students decision making processes, their inherent levels of capital, alongside well known theoretical models. Furthermore, the theories of change and nudge, encourages all stakeholders to play their part in supporting students in becoming ready for the world of work, preferably having completed a work placement. The outcome was a conceptual framework with tools that can help students on that journey.

The following chapter explains the research methodology

4.0 Methodology

4.1. Introduction

This chapter highlights the methods chosen for this research project. The purpose of the report is to develop a further understanding of the impact work placements have on graduates within Salford Business School, in particular accounting and finance students, and factors that affect their decision-making processes.

4.2 Research approach

With a mixed method approach the researcher collects and analyses not only numerical data, as in a quantitative approach, but also narrative data, aligned to a qualitative method, to address the research question (Williams, 2007). Moreover, Williams (2007) goes on to say that the mixed method approach is an extension rather than a replacement for the quantitative and qualitative approach to research and enables the researcher to combine both in a single research study.

To collect a mixture of data, the author distributed a survey containing closed-ended questions, to collect numerical quantitative data, and conducted focus group interviews using open-ended questions to provide a narrative, for qualitative data. The aims and objectives of the report will be addressed by using primary methods to address the reports objectives and secondary research statistical data to support the aims:

1. To evaluate current graduate outcomes data from 2016/17 and 201/18
2. To examine the impact work placements, have on graduate recruitment

3. To assess the social background of students who progressed from Salford Business School into employment
4. To identify the key behavioural and motivational factors that lead to successful graduate outcomes and employment
5. To put forward recommendations on how best to support ALL students in the pursuit of a graduate position

4.3 Research strategy

The research strategy for this project will be the use of a case study where Salford Business School will be used to provide context. The study of a case within a real life setting or context helps distinguish this research from others (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019, page 197) and has the capacity to generate insights into the study of a phenomenon in its real life context, leading to rich empirical descriptions and the development of theory

Within the management information systems there exists data related to graduate outcomes over a two-year period, that details the courses students were on; a placement year or not, and whether the students are employed within graduate type job roles. Following on from the research conducted by (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2022) and (Smith et al, 2018) as to the benefits work placements have on graduate outcomes, this project aims to identify whether those students on placements secured job roles quicker than those that didn't, and what impact one's social background has on the decision-making process of those students within the sample.

4.4 Time horizons

Continuing from the discussion related to the research following a mixed methods approach, there will be different methods used to obtain the relevant data. Salford Business School have provided a spreadsheet containing 1168 students who graduated in 2016/17 and 2017/18, including their grades, programme of study, quintile data and contact details. This secondary data will be used to identify those students who studied accounting and finance, completed a professional placement year, or not, with a view to developing some primary research instruments, namely individual interviews with 4 students; 2 who completed a placement year and 2 who didn't. The students will be identified through their LinkedIn profiles, from the specific data set. None of the students were known to the researcher and their invitations to connect have been conducted via LinkedIn.

4.5 Data collection methods

4.5.1 Primary and Secondary Data – collection and analysis

Details provided in the spreadsheet supplied by SBS management information systems contains personal email address and contact details of students who studied within the years noted above. Having sought ethical approval from the senior leadership team, a questionnaire was compiled to identify a number of factors related to students who had completed a PPY, or not, their decision-making process and whether they had managed to secure job roles upon graduation.

4.5.2 Research instruments – Questionnaires

For the purposes of this report, a spreadsheet from SBS management information systems was provided containing 1168 students, from a variety of subject areas including Business Management courses with economics, finance, or marketing, through to accounting and finance and operations management. Quota sampling has been chosen as it is based on the premise that the sample will represent the target population (Saunders et al, 2019) and has similar requirements for sample size as probabilistic sampling techniques. The population was sub-divided to only include Accounting and finance students (287) who had either done a Professional Placement year, or not, then subdivided in that all had achieved a first-class degree or 2:1 (212 students). Cameron and Price (2009) point out how sampling errors can arise in the research, factors that have been acknowledged later within the report: reliability, validity, and bias.

The data was subdivided into the following sections:

- Accounting and Finance
- Accounting and Finance with PPY
- Degree classification
- Socio-economic classification and description
- Polar quartile
- Personal details such as, names and email address

The data will enable the researcher to analyse the grades of those students who did a placement year against those that didn't, their SEC/Polar quartiles to assess whether they had an impact on the grades. Furthermore, the questionnaire will then attempt to identify other factors that could have impacted on students' decision to do a placement year or not.

For the focus group interviews the researcher wanted to ascertain respondents' deeper thoughts with reference to the questions asked in the questionnaire. Not knowing what the

respondents had stated when or if, they completed the questionnaire, students were contacted from both groups via their LinkedIn profiles, to take part in the focus group meetings via Teams.

There were 12 questions, of which 6 were yes/no closed questions to get some background information about the students, for example *did you complete a professional placement year, was it the right decision and did you progress directly into employment after graduating*, The final two questions were related to students background, to provide some analysis of the human capital related to their previous educational journey (A Levels or BTEC), through to their cultural capital, and whether the students are a first to go to university from their respective families. Other questions were more open in that they were attempting to provide the researcher with more detail than yes/no by providing options related to skills required, the number of applications prior to getting a job, through to how helpful SBS employability team was in their pursuit for a career. Administrators from the alumni team sent out the questionnaire to the accounting and Finance students on the spreadsheet; all had either a First-class degree or 2:1 and had either done a Placement Year or not.

4.5.3 Thematic analysis

For the qualitative information, semi-structured interviews were conducted, based on the responses in the original questionnaire related to drawing out or to support conclusions made. One of the questions focused on students who had completed a professional placement year, the other not. For example, Section 1 and 2 asks why respondents felt doing a placement year, or not was the right decision, and how quickly they secured employment. The students graduated in 2017 and 2018 so looking back they could be able to look back on that decision with hindsight in mind. Sections 3 and 4 were more focused on their past academic experiences and socio-economic backgrounds to assess the impact on their decision-making process. Moreover, the questions attempt to assess Tuononen et al (2019) conclusions that students who grasp the concept of their employability as an undergraduate were able to articulate in preparation for their working lives three years later.

Details of the sampling method will be explained in more detail later in the report.

This will assist in achieving the following objectives:

1. To assess the social background of students who progressed from Salford Business School into employment
2. To identify the key behavioural and motivational factors that lead to successful graduate outcomes and employment

In order to address the aims and objectives of the study it is important to select a suitable sample that represents the population from which it has been taken in a meaningful way (Saunders et al, 2019).

4.5.4 Sampling

For the purpose of the primary research questionnaire students were selected clustered based on their chosen field of study, accounting and finance. Furthermore, only those students who had achieved a 1st class or 2:1 degree were chosen, some having completed a professional placement year, others not. The questionnaire, produced on google forms, was sent out by SBS' Alumni office to 212 students through their individual email addresses, with 31 responding (15%). It is difficult for the author to determine who completed the questionnaire as who responded was not known.

In hindsight and for future research the sample size could have included all students within the spreadsheet, but the author wanted to ascertain the performance of students within their particular field of study.

5.0 Data Analysis and discussions

This chapter will provide an analysis of the research that has been conducted. The first section will focus on the analysis of the data contained in the spreadsheet produced by Salford University's management information systems. The following section will analyse the outcomes of the questionnaire sent out to 212 students. The final section will relate to interviews that have taken place with a view to providing some clarity related to the benefits or work placements, and in the decision-making processes of the students concerned.

5.1 QlikView secondary data

Figure 5.1 was compiled by a system called QlikView, to identify those students who graduated in 2017 and 2018 respectively. The table identifies students who completed a Professional Placement Year, or not, their degree classifications, their polar quartiles alongside their social economical class; to assess whether their background had an impact on their decision-making process or overall degree classification.

Figure 5.1: QlikView data 2016/17 & 2017/18

Accounting and Finance students 2016/17 & 2017/18										
Grade	1st and 2:1			2.2			3rd			Total s
	PPY	Not PPY	Total	PPY	Not PPY	Total	PPY	Not PPY	Total	
Students	30	182	212	0	48	48	0	27	27	287

%	14.15 %	85.85 %	100%	0.00 %	100.00 %	100 %	0.00 %	100.00 %	100 %	100 %
Average Polar	2.4	2.4	2.4		2.4			2.4		2.4
SEC	5.96	5.98	5.98		5.92			6.01		5.97
1st class	27	98	125							44%
%	90.00 %	53.85 %	58.96 %							
% of students on placements	10%									

Source: The Author (2023)

Within the spreadsheet containing 1168 students from a cross-section of students from Salford Business School, a filter was used to identify how many of those students studied accounting and finance (287) and achieved a 1st class or 2:1 degree (212). In order to assess students with a similar academic standard, the degree classification had to be the same, irrespective as to whether they had done a PPY, or not.

The spreadsheet provides only quantitative information, that will indicate that the vast majority of students who completed a PPY achieved a first-class degree (97%) as opposed to the 53.85% of students who achieved a first not taking a professional placement year. This supports the research conducted by Atfield et al. (2021) who noted that undergraduate work placements tend to be linked to positive outcomes for students.

It was interest to note that the Figure 5.1's data related to students polar quartiles (an average of 2.4) indicate a similar participation rate between each group, as does social economic class (semi-routine occupations, an average of around 6) had no significant impact on across all degree classifications.

5.2 Questionnaire responses

The questionnaire has 12 questions and was sent out to 212 accounting and finance students who graduated in 2017 and 2018. The questionnaire was sent out by Salford Business School's alumni team via google forms, with 32 responses (15%). The following information relates to those findings:

Questions 1 and 2 was related to whether the students completed a PPY, or not and whether, in hindsight they made the right decision: 62.5% of respondents (20 out of 32) completed a PPY, with 75% of all respondents believing they had made the right decision.

Incidentally 15.6% of respondents were employed by the company they did their placement year (question 6).

Some of the following questions will be more qualitative in nature, so will hopefully shed some more light on the questions asked, Question 3 asks the respondents to explain why they felt their decision was correct.

Questions 3

Question 3 sought to find out what students felt about the first two questions with a view to eliciting some of the reasons behind their choices. The responses were split between those who had completed a PPY and those that hadn't. As the comments were anonymous, the researcher can only surmise the comments made, such as:

In support of a PPY:

"I regret not completing a placement year. I think this would have better prepared for me life after university. There are skills learnt on the job that can't be replicated in an academic environment which are important to know".

"I believe if I had a placement year will have more confident to pass interviews and find a job, it will also improve my practical experience."

"It gave me valuable working and office experience, as well as a break from exams and university. It gave me an idea of what I did and didn't like from an office environment as well as a desirable addition to my CV when looking for grad jobs. The placement year was loosely finance related (my degree was accounting and finance), so whilst didn't help me towards my professional exams, I learnt a lot and valued the experience."

Comments made in support of students doing a work placement are supported by the report conducted by BIS (2016) relating to students feeling that experience improved their employability prospects overall, especially related to any area of interest. Moreover, Smith et al (2018) noted that the real-life experiences of being in a working environment improves employment prospects and provides students with an awareness of future career plans.

"I managed to complete education earlier and didn't affect me finding a job, manage to secure a job whilst I was doing my exams, managed to get a first without a placement I don't regret not having placement year."

With reference to students who didn't complete a placement year, Atfield et al's (2021) points about being a positive experience could also support the notion that student's ability, could be a determining factor for them progressing directly into work upon graduation, i.e. the positive outcome was based more on students ability and not on a work placement. When you include high levels of social and psychological capital, Tomlinson, (2017), and those CareerEdge factors related to the three S's: Self-awareness, self-efficacy and self-confidence (Dacre-Pool, 2020)

Question 4 asked how quickly did students' progress directly from university into employment after graduating (91%), and a follow up question related to the timeframe (question 5).

Interestingly 53% of the respondents secured employment in less than a month and 37.5% between one to six months. However, it is worth pointing out that question 10 asked all students how many applications forms they completed prior to securing a job:

Question 10

33.3% of respondents applied for more than 15 jobs prior to securing a position with an additional 44.4% between 5 and 15 applications. Tomlinson's (2017) work psychological capital alongside Dacre-Pools' emotional levels of self-confidence and self-efficacy can help support students' resilience and develop a 'never-give-up attitude (Dacre-Pool, 2020).

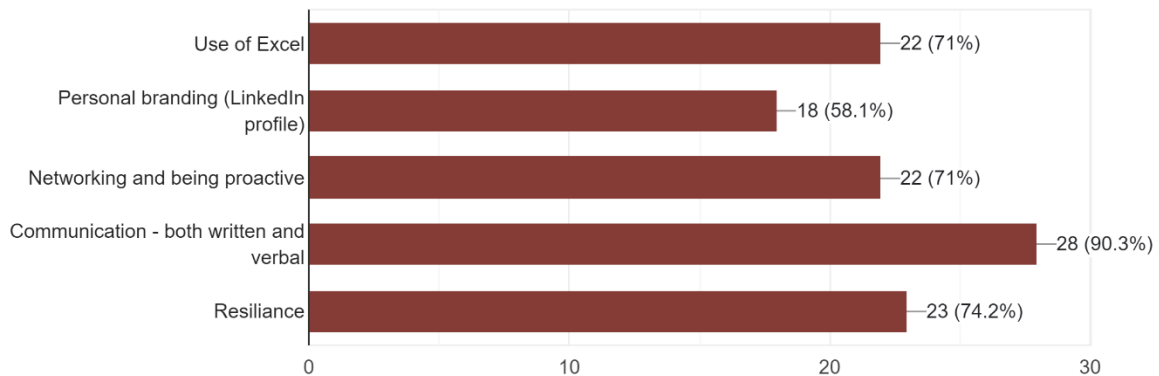
The final two questions were related to qualifications students studied prior to coming to university and whether they were the first in their families to attend. There is a perception that students who study A levels tend to perform better at university than those with BTEC's, and that if your parents or siblings had been to university before, you were more likely to have higher levels of capital, whether they be psychological, identity or cultural.

As it transpired 72% of respondents studied A levels with only 37.5% being the first in the family to attend.

Questions 10 were related to skills and what respondents felt are important when supporting students in the attempts to secure employment:

What skills do you think are important that you would share with current students looking to seek employment? (Choose the ones relevant to you)

31 responses



Students felt the most important skills were related to communication skills, in particular verbal and written, highlighting the importance of authentic assessments that develop graduate attributes related to student levels of human capital, what they know, and a greater emphasis on the social capability attributes of being a good networker (Batistic & Tymon, 2017).

5.3 Interview responses

It was the authors intention to interview 2 students who had completed a placement year and 2 that hadn't, again with similar grades, and evaluate students' response against the feedback from the questionnaire. Due to time commitments and students' engagement, the author only managed to secure interviews with two students who had completed a professional placement year. Additional research related to students who didn't, would be beneficial. However, qualitative comments made within the questionnaire do provide some context and their feelings.

As noted previously, 2 students who completed PPY were contacted via LinkedIn asked to take part in a short interview to ascertain their experiences on placement. The following interview had 11 open ended related to questions noted in the questionnaire, but more qualitative in nature to draw out a more in-depth analysis of the questions asked.

5.3.1 Overview of interview responses (Dacre-Pool, 2020)

It must be noted, as in the analysis of the questionnaire, both students achieved 1st class degrees and were employed by the same organisation where they completed their work placements. On that basis, the theories of Atfield et al (2021) appear to be aligned to the

outcomes of the two students' positive outcomes and Brookes and Youngson (2016) who noted that students not only achieved higher grades, but also likely to gain employment.

With reference to graduate attributes, it is clear from the students' responses that both had the ability to articulate their skills in a clear and concise manner, whilst at the same time provide evidence of their development (Dunne, 2017)

The proposed conceptual framework (Figure 3.4) identified key personality traits that would be beneficial to encourage students to do work placements and make the most of the opportunities available, however the respondents psychological capital has not yet been tested due to securing employment prior to graduation, but does highlight the strengths related to identity/cultural capital and in the three S's related to making the most of the opportunities available (efficacy), an awareness of their strengths and weaknesses and how to address them (confidence) thus relating to their belief in themselves (esteem) (Dacre-Pool, 2020).

The following amended conceptual framework will take note of the theory of change methodology, ensuring that all stakeholders, internal and external, play a pivotal role in supporting and encouraging students to take up the opportunity of completing a work placement and the benefits arising.

5.4 Revised Conceptual Framework

The theory of change model has been incorporated into the proposed conceptual model (Figure 3.4) to demonstrate the importance of having a structure that provides a visual insight into the resources needed and activities required, both short and long term, to meet the objectives of this report and provide clarity to all stakeholders.

Taking on board the comments made within the primary research (the questionnaire and interviews) alongside the information contained in the literature review, a refined conceptual framework is detailed below.

The initial conceptual framework focussed on the personality traits and student characteristics that will help them to enhance and develop their individual employability skills, irrespective of the starting points: capitals and three S's.

The refined framework is related to making sure more students take on board the opportunities work placements provide, and respective benefits, with a framework that provides clarity for all stakeholders, and an awareness of key points of when interventions need to be made (Harries, et al., 2014)

5.4.1 Inputs and enablers

The inputs and enablers are related to the resources that go into the project, such as budgets and staffing, through to those internal and external stakeholders who are key to the success of the project: committed staff members within SBS and supportive employers, including alumni

5.4.2 Activities

The activities relate to developing a supportive network of professionals who make sure the project achieves its intended outcomes; guest speakers, embedding employability within the curriculum and motivating students through recent alumni, who can act as mentors to develop students' levels of confidence, and encourage them to make the most of the opportunities available, including work placements.

5.4.3 Outcomes

As noted throughout the research, student outcomes improve when students go on work placements, resulting in employers and governmental bodies (OfS) being satisfied with HE institutions graduate outcomes data. On that basis the final outcomes will be to increase the amount of students going on work placements by enhancing the links with supportive employers, as students' progress directly from education into work.

Figure 5.1 Refined Conceptual Framework

Personality traits	Key characteristics	Student development	Theory of Change – inputs and activities – Harries et al (2014)	TOC - Outputs
Psychological	<i>Managing the inevitable career challenges students will have with reference to rejection and tenacity</i>	<i>Resilience and never giving up attitude</i>	Inputs/enablers <i>The resources going into the project:</i> • Senior Leadership commitment • Academic/lecturers • Professional Services/Support staff • Supportive employers. Including alumni Activities <i>Things to be done:</i> • Embed into provision • Employer working group • Alumni support and mentoring • Collaboration with other institutions	Intermediate outcomes <i>An active and collaborative group:</i> • Working together to motivate and encourage students • Increased number of students on work placements Final Outcome/goal • Increased number of work ready and confident students • Improved graduate outcomes/NSS results
Identity	<i>The way in which you understand yourself and describe who you are to others.</i>	<i>Presentation and investing in you to achieve what you want to achieve</i>		
Cultural	<i>Students' backgrounds, socio-economic groups and understanding of the field rules</i>	<i>Empathy and teamworking</i>		
Self:				
Efficacy	<i>Lower levels of self-efficacy related to the perception of not being able enough</i>	<i>Seeking opportunities available that help secure employment</i>		
Confidence	<i>A sense of one's own competence and capability</i>	<i>You know your strengths and weaknesses and have a positive view of yourself</i>		
Esteem	<i>How we value and perceive ourselves</i>	<i>Being worthy and capable</i>		

Source: The Author (2020)

The following chapter presents conclusions and recommendations

6.0 Conclusion and recommendations

The following chapter provides a conclusion with a view to demonstrating how the research objectives have been achieved, the limitations of the study and the opportunities to develop the subject matter going forward.

6.1 Research objectives

The literature review, secondary data collated from QlikView, and in-depth interviews appear to support the benefits of students doing work placements with reference to positive students and graduate outcomes (97%) of students achieving a 1st class degrees in Figure 2.1 and the two students who took part in the interviews.

Student responses in the questionnaire sent out via google forms seem to indicate students were happy with the decisions they made with reference to doing a PPY or not, and that they all managed to secure a graduate job within the year. However, there is a need for additional research related to students who achieved a 2:2 or 3rd class degree to determine why they didn't choose to do a placement year and how they can be encouraged to.

It was also noted that the various capitals were important in helping students in their decision-making process as some students who self-selected not to do a placement year, had high levels of corresponding capital related to psychological, cultural and a strong sense of identity, managed to secure a graduate position without feeling the need to do a work placement. However, there is a strong body of evidence and research, and corresponding models, that try to encourage students with lower levels of capital (so all students) to building on the three S's of self-awareness, self-efficacy and self-confidence in order to enhance their various levels of capital and become career ready.

6.1.1 Conceptual Framework and recommendations

Based on the literature review, the employability models and primary and secondary research, a conceptual framework has been devised to address the intended outcomes of the research and corresponding models, to encourage all stakeholders in working together to support students as they progress into the world of work, with the necessary skills and attributes to succeed within their chosen professions.

To achieve those goals, it is important that key personnel within SBS provide SMART action plans that track students throughout their individual learner journeys, through the new accounting and finance provision that has employability embedded in all levels of the course.

In 2016/17 there were only 7 students who completed a PPY, rising to 23 in 2017/18, 30 in 2021/22 and 33 in the current academic year. The plan is to significantly increase the number of students going on to placements (targets to be set) but possibly double the amount to 66 by 2024/25. This will require all stakeholders, especially employers to help support that process.

The more students with a positive educational experience, irrespective of their academic and cultural starting points, resulting in them securing graduate employment, will result in ensuring graduate outcomes of SBS improve significantly.

6.2 Limitations

Though factors related to reliability, validity and bias have been noted above there are limitations related to any research topic. There are 1169 students within the population of data, but the author decided to focus on just those students studying accounting and finance with a 1st and/or 2:1 degree classification. This was due to try to provide a like-for-like comparison of students with similar levels of ability who had done a professional placement year or not, no students below a 2:1 did a PPY.

Due to time constraints and student responses, a number of students were contacted to take part in individual 1-2-1 interviews, but the researcher only managed to speak to 2 students who had successfully completed a PPY (appendices 2 and 3), to ascertain their thoughts related to the benefits, or not of doing a professional placement year. A more detailed analysis would have been beneficial in addressing the research questions.

6.3 Future research

The author is keen to develop their research skills and by working with other colleagues with a similar interest in embedding employability within HE provision, and hope to complete a PHD. There are a number of factors that still need to be addressed, such as interviews with students who didn't complete a PPY and what they have achieved.

The Conceptual Framework needs to be monitored clearly, and the theory of change will bring about a number of interventions that need to be addressed and produce research opportunities throughout each stage. It is particularly interesting why some students, especially on level 4, don't engage as SBS would like, and how can they be inspired to take note of the opportunities available. Equally, the tracking of alumni will help develop stronger links with SBS employers to support the students of today.

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