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3 Work placements for languages students: a transformative experience

Alison Organ¹

1. Introduction

A work placement module is compulsory in the second year of most degree programmes at York St John University, as part of an institution-wide strategy to embed employability in the curriculum. As most languages students spend their second year studying abroad, the Languages in the Workplace module was designed in such a way that the setting up of the placement is carried out on the student's own initiative. This case study reports on how the module works and what the students feel they gain from it.

Keywords: languages, work placement, study abroad, jobs, employability, skills.

2. What we did

The module director holds meetings during the first year to explain the module to the students, and keeps in touch with them during their study abroad to monitor how their quest for a placement is progressing. Students are informed about previous placements in their location, to give them a head start in looking for a host organisation.

Many students are approached by their host university to provide English classes. Others investigate commercial language schools, or explore the tourism, retail or hospitality sectors. More unusual placements have included working

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at Disneyland Paris, in an Irish pub in Japan, or for Camp America. Students of British Sign Language (BSL) often seek placements in special schools and centres for the deaf, as well as charities and local council support services.

Assessment consists of a report detailing the setting-up process, the negotiation of the student's role, an evaluation of the host organisation, a self-assessment of the student's performance, any language or communication issues observed, and the impact of the placement on their career plans. A completion form signed and stamped by the host organisation is also required, to guarantee authenticity.

“The placement has also given me experience that I can write on my CV when applying for the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme. It was good preparation and it has stopped worry and fear of the unknown of working abroad and has eased concerns about working in Japan” [Amy², BA (Hons) Theology and Japanese, 2011].

Another important aspect is the negotiation of the workplace agreement which sets out what the student hopes to achieve from the placement. This has proved to be highly beneficial in enhancing the experience and tailoring it to their needs:

“I went through the form and my aims with my supervisor. I found this meeting to be extremely beneficial in the fact that she now knew what I wanted to get out of my placement, so she could place me in a class that would allow me to complete all my aims to the highest standard possible” [Bryce, BA (Hons) English Literature and BSL, 2014].

3. Discussion of outcomes

The website [Graduate Prospects \(2015\)](#) highlights the benefits of work experience abroad:

2. Student names have been changed. All student quotations are taken from student reports submitted for the 'Languages in the Workplace' module, 2011-14.

- “**Sink or swim** - demonstrate to potential employers that you can cope in a multicultural, multilingual working environment and produce great work in the process”.
- “**Language skills** - these are hugely valuable to employers and spending time abroad and working alongside non-English speakers will help them improve”.
- “**Get up and go** - moving abroad and finding work experience shows motivation, independence, maturity and adaptability - all extra ticks on your job application forms”.

Our students’ comments echo these sentiments. Many students regard the experience as transformative, commenting on its effect on their self-reliance and their ability to interact in the target language in often challenging situations:

“This work placement has given me the confidence to consider the possibility of returning to Spain in the future to work as I have proved to myself that I am able to work in a team of people from a foreign country and still be able to complete the tasks required of me without any problems” [Sally, BA (Hons) Business Management and Spanish, 2011].

4. Conclusion

The work placement module can appear to be a minor part of the students’ programme, possibly because of the fact it is not a taught module in the traditional sense. However, it is clear from reading their reports that students value the whole process highly, and that even a negative experience can clarify their career path. The following student’s comments provide a fitting conclusion to this case study:

“I don’t regret my placement; it has been an undeniably beneficial experience, even if it was just to clarify that working as a teacher in Japan

was something not for me. But the skills and experience I have gained will be something I can take away and apply to my next line of work, whatever that may be. In fact, I feel that being able to tell a future employer that I lived and worked in Japan at the age of 19 is something impressive in itself” [Barry, BA (Hons) Business Management and Japanese, 2011].

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