Experience Works?

Exploring the Value of Student Work Experience in the Graduate Labour Market

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Experience Works?

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1. Executive summary

This report presents findings from research undertaken by the University of Edinburgh Careers Service on students', graduates' and employers' perceptions of the value of work experience. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected from employers, students and graduates during the academic year 2017-2018. Alongside a substantial review of the literature on work experience, it provides an evidence-based insight into students', graduates' and employers' perceptions on the value of work experience and develops some recommendations for how careers services can support students with finding and making the most of work experience opportunities.

Quantitative and qualitative data was collected from employers actively recruiting at the University of Edinburgh via an online survey and qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with 15 employers representing a variety of sectors and organization sizes. Employers who responded to the survey and took part in interviews identified their key skill requirements as creativity, problem solving, critical and systems thinking. Employers also cited the importance of other psychological factors including self-management, flexibility and resilience.

Employers were positive about students' disciplinary knowledge but placed equal weighting on long-term and varied extracurricular activities and cited work experience as being one of the most important factors in recruiting as it was seen as an opportunity for students to develop employability skills and to apply these in a pressurised environment.

60 students participating in the *Edinburgh Award* for part-time work responded to an online survey and reported a wide range of skills developed through their part-time work, with communication and working under pressure being reported as the top skills developed. The concept of a 'hierarchy' of experience is also partially supported by the survey data; 37 respondents reported that they perceived employers to regard directly relevant work experience as the most important type of experience.

Survey data also supports the hypothesis that some students face barriers to undertaking work experience. Our survey respondents cited barriers including the experience being unpaid, the opportunity cost in terms of time taken to do the experience and the distance required to travel to undertake experience and the associated costs involved in this.

Seven University of Edinburgh graduates took part in semi-structured interviews and similarly to students reported a wide range of skills developed through their work experience including problem solving, communication, organisation, confidence and time management. Beyond purely skill development some graduates also reported learning about themselves and adjusting to the workplace after graduation.

Graduates also identified that their experience had supported them to develop skills that might feature less prominently in the academic domain, for example teamwork and presentation skills, and in supporting their holistic self-development. Several participants were able to reflect on the value of their experience in supporting them to become more rounded and motivated individuals. This supports the findings from some of the work experience literature and the role of work experience in supporting the development of a graduate identity (e.g. Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011; Holmes, 2015; Jackson, 2017).

Finally, graduates highlighted that their work experience had enabled them to test out different work environments, clarify their personal values and career aspirations.

There was also evidence from interviews that our graduates were able to deeply reflect on their experiences and articulate the benefits that went far beyond skill development to include the role their experiences played in forming their identity as graduates and in making the transition into the workplace after graduation. There is also a wealth of evidence from the literature of the value of reflection before during and after the experience in supporting students to articulate what they have developed through their work experience and to derive maximum benefit from it (see Artess *et al.,* 2017 for a summary of this). It is

therefore perhaps not just a simple case of 'Experience works' but experience works when there is reflection, reflection, reflection!

Several recommendations arise from this research in terms of how careers services can best support students with finding and making the most of work experience, including:

- Creating clear and consistent terminology for students around the topic of work experience and what constitutes work experience in its broadest sense
- Understanding the barriers to students being able to undertake work experience and supporting students where possible to break down those barriers
- Supporting students before, during and after the experience to reflect and make the most of that experience.

There were some limitations to this research however as our samples of employers, students and graduates were convenience samples. Employers surveyed were those actively recruiting from the University of Edinburgh while students were participating in the *Edinburgh Award* for part-time work and therefore already engaged in the topic of work experience. Our graduates had an established relationship with us and had previously indicated they were willing to 'give back' to the University in some way and as the interviewer noted, all were settled and happy in their jobs. Further research is therefore recommended in order to capture a sample that is more broadly representative of students and graduates, including those who may be under or unemployed after graduation.

2. Introduction, background and purpose of the project

2.1 Introduction and background

Since the publication of the Dearing Report (1997) there has been explicit recognition that "*A degree alone is not enough"* to secure employment after graduation and that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) need to do more to support students with developing their employability[1]. Such recognition has been echoed in other reviews of the UK Higher Education system including the Wilson Review (2012) and more recently, the Auger Review of funding of post 18 education in England (Auger, 2019). The Auger Review discusses the need to tackle what is termed 'low value' HE and to ensure that courses are aligned with the economy's needs, along with the need for post 18 education to be forward looking. Implicit in this is the need to meet employers' needs as well as those of the labour market.

The issue of employability, however defined, and the role of HEIs in supporting students to develop it is therefore here to stay and will likely only intensify in a competitive graduate labour market, which is likely to become increasingly uncertain now that the UK has left the European Union. Over a decade ago, Tomlinson (2008) pointed to the stakes being raised when discussing the expansion of HE in the UK, with this expansion not reflecting an increase in the skills or knowledge required to *do* a job but rather the stakes have been raised in terms of what's needed to *get* a job and this observation is no less relevant today.

One means of addressing the issue of graduates requiring more than a degree to ensure a smooth transition into the labour market is for students to obtain work experience whilst at university. Indeed Crebert *et al.* (2004) discuss the role of work experience in providing opportunities for *transformative learning*, so it seems an ideal solution and students are becoming increasingly active in seeking out such experience. Weiss *et al.* (2014) highlighted the issue of HE certificates as becoming "less reliable productivity signals" and the need for students to develop additional work related skills to distinguish themselves when applying for graduate employment.

Silva *et al.* (2018) also highlight that HEIs across Europe are investing significant resources in developing students' work related skills to assist their integration into the job market. Examples include HEIs responding by developing various employability initiatives such as course-related placements, credit-bearing employability modules, university skills awards and internship schemes. At the departmental level, university careers services have responded by encouraging students to seek out various types of work experience. For example at the University of Edinburgh we have developed the *#ExperienceWorks* campaign to raise students' awareness of the potential benefits of various forms of work experience and to support them with finding work experience, including some of the many alternatives to formal internship schemes. Since 2012 we have also developed a number of University internship schemes including on-campus and SME programmes, and more recently an *Insights* programme aimed at Widening Participation students.

In all of these responses and initiatives there is of course an underlying assumption that students are aware of the benefits of work experience for their employability (Mahmood *et al.* 2014) and within HEIs, the encouragement of students to gain experience is based on an assumption that this labour market exposure is valuable, both to the students themselves and to graduate employers. However there is merit in exploring these assumptions further and in particular whether the utility of experience gained through working should be concretely placed above alternative forms of experience such as volunteering or extracurricular experiences, for example taking an active role in a student society.

The value of work experience is often uncontested within HE; making a successful transition into graduate employment and career success is often seen to be contingent on the acquisition of meaningful and relevant work experience. Numerous studies exist demonstrating that it is valued by students and employers alike (e.g. Andrews & Higson 2008), sometimes even above a student's academic achievements (e.g. High Fliers 2017). Increasing numbers of employers are using placements as a recruitment strategy

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[1] It is well beyond the scope of this report to discuss differing notions of employability but for an excellent summary see Artess *et al.* (2017).

and tool (NCUB 2016) and, as we've seen, increasing numbers of HEIs are responding to the employability debate by integrating work placements into students' courses (Helyer and Lee 2014).

It has been noted elsewhere that formal, structured placements are significantly more common in some disciplines, for example in engineering, health, education, architecture/planning, business/finance and law, than in others (BIS 2012), although the quality of some of the placements and experiences on offer has also been called into question at times (CIPD 2012). It must also be recognised that some of these schemes may be focused on developing recruitment streams for employers, rather than on the exploratory benefits to students. In some sectors, there is a shortage of high quality, structured and formal internship type experiences, but there is increasing student demand for them and alongside this many students perceive that employers require students to complete a structured placement during their academic studies.

In considering Widening Participation students, there may also be a need for some of these students to undertake part-time paid work during their academic studies, driven by economic necessity. With such a focus on formal internship experiences and a perception that these are perhaps privileged above other forms of work experience such as part-time work, there is a risk that existing inequalities could become further entrenched, if such students are not able to undertake this kind of experience.

As careers services one of our aims is to assist and encourage students to obtain work experience in its many forms and to identify and articulate the benefits. For example, as careers professionals, we often encounter students who claim to have 'nothing to put on a CV' but who have in fact been involved in activities (e.g. part-time work) which they have deemed irrelevant, and we actively encourage students to reflect on the skills and competencies they have developed across all their experiences.

But are our strategies as careers services and practitioners based on sound evidence? Does it matter whether students' experiences are relevant if learning and development can still be demonstrated? If it is true that employers value an internship above other types of experience, then are we misleading students by reassuring them of the value of all experience? Do our assumptions around work experience have a sound basis in fact? This project seeks to provide answers to some of these questions and provide an evidence base to inform our practice.

2.2 Research questions

How do students, graduates and employers conceive of and value different kinds of work experience?

More specifically:

- What constitutes 'meaningful' work experience to students and graduates? Is there a 'hierarchy' of experiences? For example, is the formal internship type of experience valued above other types of experience?

- What attributes do employers look for in students and graduates? What value do they place on different types of work experience?

- What skills do students and graduates believe they gain from their work experience?

- Are there any barriers to students being able to undertake work experience?

The project aims to ensure that careers service practice is based on sound evidence and understanding, from the literature and informed by the views of students, graduates and employers. Students can be susceptible to the messages propagated by high profile graduate recruiters, which are repeated, often uncritically, in the media. We therefore have a responsibility to explore, and where necessary counter, this narrative and to present a more nuanced picture of work experience opportunities and associated benefits, so that students can make informed decisions about the actions that will best support their futures.

This study will therefore look at employers', students' and graduates' perceptions of the value of different types of work experience to address this gap and enable careers services to give evidence-based advice to students.

Section 3 provides a summary of a review of the literature on work experience, in its very broadest sense encompassing internships, placements, volunteering, part-time jobs and extracurricular activities and a summary of the findings and key themes arising.

3. Literature review

3.1 Introduction and context

This literature review provides a critical summary of research and some emergent issues in order to contextualise the project *'Experience Works? Exploring the Value of Student Work Experience in the Graduate Labour Market'*. Much of the current literature addresses the impact of structured work experience such as formal internships or placements on employment prospects and employability skills (e.g. Crebert *et al.,* 2004; Drysdale and McBeath, 2012; Freudenberg *et al.,* 2011; Heyler and Lee 2014, Jackson and Wilton, 2016; Jackson and Collings, 2018; Lock *et al.,* 2009; Mahmood *et al.,* 2014; Purdie *et al.,* 2013; Reddy and Moores, 2012; and Wilton 2012), while research on less structured experiences such as part-time work and extracurricular activities is much more limited. The '*Experience Works'* project therefore seeks to provide a more nuanced evaluation of various types of work experience to provide a better evidence base and to inform the support offered by university careers services.

A wide range of studies in the UK, European, North American and Australian contexts have sought to evaluate the impact of various forms of work experience on students and/or graduates. A review of the literature highlights that 'work experience' itself can take multiple forms from structured formal internship schemes through to unstructured and more informal experience that students might set up themselves. The bulk of studies in the literature have sought to examine the impact of more formal experiences on students and graduates following placements embedded as part of an academic course, commonly known as *sandwich placements* in the UK or what some studies term *work-integrated learning* (usually in the UK or Australian contexts) or *cooperative education* (usually in the North American context) (e.g. Crebert *et al.,* 2004; Drysdale and McBeath, 2012; Freudenberg *et al.,* 2011; Heyler and Lee, 2014; Jackson and Wilton, 2016; Jackson and Collings, 2018; Klein and Weiss, 2011; Lock *et al.,* 2009; Mahmood *et al.,* 2014; Purdie *et al.,* 2013; Reddy and Moores, 2012; Weiss *et al.,* 2014; Wilton, 2012). For the purpose of this study all of these can be regarded as formal, structured types of experience.

Some studies have also sought to examine the impact of other types of experience on students or graduates including extracurricular activities (e.g. Clark *et al.,* 2015; Lau *et al.,* 2014; Stuart *et al.,* 2011; Thompson *et al.,* 2013), volunteering (e.g. Barton *et al.,* 2017; Holmes, 2006) and part-time work (e.g. Barton *et al.,* 2017; Evans *et al.,* 2015; Muldoon, 2009; Thompson *et al.,* 2013).

Within the HE sector, in responding to the employability agenda, there is an underlying assumption that work experience is beneficial in some way and a review of the literature identifies some of those possible benefits. These range from studies aiming to link "hard" outcomes such as employment outcomes for graduates who have undertaken work placements at university, including the impact on their transition to the labour market and other employment indicators including job stability and hourly wages (e.g. Brooks and Youngson, 2016; Drysdale and McBeath, 2012; Klein and Weiss, 2011; Moores and Reddy, 2012; Silva *et al.,* 2016; Weiss *et al.,* 2014).

Others have examined the impact on students' employability skills more generally (e.g. Barton *et al.,* 2017; Crebert *et al.,* 2004; Freudenberg *et al.,* 2011; Irwin *et al.,* 2018; Jackson and Collings, 2018; Lau *et al.,* 2014; Lock *et al.,* 2009; Mahmood *et al.,* 2014; Muldoon, 2009; Purdie *et al.,* 2013; Stuart *et al.,* 2011; Wilton, 2012), their career management skills (e.g. Jackson and Wilton, 2016), generic skills (e.g. Crebert *et al.,* 2004; Freudenberg *et al.,* 2011) and some have examined the link with development of other "soft" outcomes for example, self-confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy and tacit skills (e.g. Drysdale and McBeath, 2012; Freudenberg *et al.,* 2011; Jackson, 2017; Purdie *et al.,* 2013; Wilton, 2012) and in one case, graduates' greater confidence in relation to the recruitment process specifically (e.g. Brooks and Youngson, 2016). Reviewing the literature above has highlighted a number of issues that are worth discussion and these are presented in turn below.

3.2 The nature of evidence: Self-perceptions versus empirical evidence

The bulk of research undertaken has been based on students' or graduates' self-reporting or self-perception of their skills after a period of work experience (e.g. Barton *et al.,* 2017; Crebert *et al.,* 2004; Drysdale and McBeath, 2012; Freudenberg *et al.,* 2011; Irwin *et al.,* 2018; Jackson and Wilton, 2016; Jackson and Collings, 2018; Lau *et al.,* 2014; Lock *et al.,* 2009; Mahmood *et al.,* 2014; Muldoon, 2009; Purdie *et al.,* 2013; Stuart *et al.,* 2011; Wilton, 2012), while those studies looking at the impact on employment outcomes and labour market transitions are much more limited (e.g. Brooks and Youngson, 2016; Klein and Weiss, 2011; Moores and Reddy, 2012; Silva *et al.,* 2016; Weiss *et al.,* 2014).

It's not to say that the former don't have value or merit but it does raise the issue that the conclusions are based on students' or graduates' *perceptions* of their skill development rather than on an actual *measured* change in skill level. Indeed, both Jackson (2015) and Jackson and Collings (2018) discuss some of the reasons for this this lack of empirical evidence, including the multiple confounding factors that might influence graduates' employment outcomes and the difficulty in isolating these for study. Jackson (2015) also highlights that in some of the literature there have been negative or negligible outcomes for graduates after a period of experience (e.g. Klein and Weiss, 2011 in their study on mandatory internships) and that this might be due to multiple confounding factors impacting on graduates' success, or lack of, in making a transition into the labour market and how issues such as prevailing labour market conditions also need to be taken into account in any study.

3.3 The selection problem in the social sciences

Another weakness in the literature is related to what Manski (1999) has termed *the selection problem in the social sciences*. Several studies point out that when studying voluntary placements and experiences, there may be inherent differences between those students who choose to do a placement and those who don't, with the more academically able, motivated and goal focussed students opting to gain experience. Caution must therefore be exercised in making any links between voluntary placements and potential benefits and this is discussed in several studies (e.g. Artess *et al.,* 2017; Bullock *et al.,* 2009; Drysdale and McBeath, 2012; Klein and Weiss, 2011; Moores and Reddy, 2012; Purdie *et al.,* 2013; Reddy and Moores, 2012).

The bulk of studies examined for this literature review have investigated the impact of placements but have not discussed whether these were voluntary or mandatory in nature. Notable exceptions are both Klein and Weiss (2011) and Silva *et al.,* (2016) and both of these studies suggest that whether a placement is mandatory or not can impact on the potential benefits to students. Indeed contra to many widely held assumptions about the benefits of work experience, the study by Klein and Weiss (2011) found no discernible benefit to students who undertook a mandatory placement.

3.4 Confusing and inconsistent terminology in relation to both "work experience" and "employability"

As discussed above, various forms of "work experience" in its very broadest sense are investigated in the literature and there is a wide range of terminology used. The bulk of studies have examined the role of placements or what is often termed *work-integrated learning.* In the UK this type of experience is commonly referred to as *sandwich placements* and in parts North America and Australia as *Cooperative education.* Indeed, Perkins (2018) identifies this as an issue and in her study students reported that they would appreciate more clarity around terminology and what exactly constitutes "work experience". Even the term "internship" is somewhat ambiguous as these may be formal and structured or informal and unstructured. In addition to "work experience" in this formal sense there are also a wide range of other opportunities that students can engage in and benefit from including volunteering, paid part-time work, extracurricular and co-curricular activities and these may be relevant to the students' field of study or intended career sector or not.

Another issue related to terminology is discussed at length by Artess *et al.* (2017) in their review of the employability literature and it's worthy of discussion here given the number of studies linking work experience (however defined) with development of students' employability. Their review found contested and differing notions of employability in the literature, with these ranging from general definitions relating to the development of generic skills and graduate attributes to those that make employment outcomes explicit

in their definition. They also highlight the issue of the dual nature of employability which has also been discussed by Yorke (2006) and Lau *et al.* (2014). Employability can be both relative and absolute; it is dependent on both individual ability and contextual factors such as prevailing labour market conditions.

Artess *et al.* (2017) also discuss the more recent shift in discussions about employability from one of employability or employability skills to one of identity (e.g. Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011; Holmes, 2015; Jackson, 2017; Leach, 2015; Meijers, 1998). Indeed Jackon's (2017) study specifically looked at the link between work-integrated learning and development of pre-professional identity in students. Some of the literature has also discussed the notion of the Protean Career and the importance of individuals taking personal responsibility for their career management and development (e.g. Hall, 1996, 2004; Lin, 2015). Both Artess *et al.* (2017) and Jackson and Wilton (2016) highlight the importance of career management skills as distinct and separate but also closely interlinked with employability and the role of work experience in developing these skills. This builds on the work of Watts (2006) who pointed out that the development of career management skills is not always harnessed by HEIs and work-integrated learning offers a platform for their development. In any discussion of work experience and the potential benefits it's therefore important to develop a clear and consistent terminology around work experience in light of Perkins' (2018) recommendation and also to broaden the discussion to include not just simply employability or employability skills but also the broader skills of career management and graduate identity.

This is timely given the current focus on the future of jobs and work in light of discussions around the *Fourth Industrial Revolution* (Schwab, 2017) and the World Economic Forum publications examining the skills needs in the future labour market (World Economic Forum, 2016, 2018) which place an emphasis on the need for lifelong learning and self-management. Such skills align well with the notion of graduate identity and Protean Career.

3.5 Placement organisation and management

Another key issue that is clear from reviewing the literature is the need for placements to be adequately organised and managed, so as to optimise the experience for students (discussed in e.g. Bullock *et al.* 2009, Coll *et al,* 2009; Crebert *et al.* 2004; Holmes, 2006; Jackson, 2015; Klein and Weiss, 2011; Lock *et al.,* 2009; Mahmood *et al.,* 2014; Silva *et al.,* 2016; Silva *et al.,* 2018). Wilton (2012) also recommends that HEIs do more to understand what makes a 'good' placement experience and Jackson (2017) recommends that HEIs develop good practice guidelines in relation to the management and organisation of placements. Such a recommendation is echoed by Perkins (2018) who highlights that students need to be adequately supported in their work experience activities and in making the most of them.

What's clear therefore is that it's not a straightforward case of work experience being beneficial on its own; adequate support mechanisms need to be in place for students to capitalise and this needs to be borne in mind in any discussions on the value of experience. Jackson's (2017) recommendation for good practice could be applied to all types of work experience and therefore encompass experience in its broadest sense, including part-time work, volunteering and extracurricular activities. University award schemes such as the *Edinburgh Award* are addressing this by supporting students to reflect before, during and after their experiences but it's worth considering whether HEIs could do more in this area. Lock *et al.* (2009) note that many students lack confidence about going on placement due to uncertainty and many of them need more support making the transition to the workplace, so there is a clear need for pre-placement preparation and placement organisation and management guidelines could also address this issue.

3.6 The value of reflection

Related to the issue of placement organisation and management is that of reflection. It's clear from reviewing the literature that for students and graduates to gain maximum benefit from their experience, whatever the activity, they need to be given the opportunity to reflect and consider what they have gained (as discussed in e.g. Barton *et al.,* 2017; Clark *et al.,* 2015; Coll *et al.,* 2009; Crebert *et al.,* 2004; Drysdale and McBeath, 2012; Evans *et al.,* 2015; Heyler and Lee, 2014; Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011; Mahmood *et al.,* 2014; Jackson, 2017; Jackson and Wilton, 2016; Pennington *et al.,* 2013; Purdie *et al.,* 2013; Silva *et al.,* 2018; Stuart *et al.,* 2011; Thompson *et al.,* 2013; Wilton, 2012).

This issue was also discussed at length by Artess *et al.* (2017) in their review of the employability literature 2012-2016. Getting experience *per se* does not necessarily mean there is a benefit for the student but rather the benefit comes from being able to reflect on and articulate what they have developed and so integrating reflection into the experience is key.

This is not a straightforward process by any means. Gibbs (1988) reminds us of the stages of reflection and that this can be done before, during or after the experience, so timing needs to be considered. Jackson (2015) discusses the need for goal setting before placements, time for review during and taking stock after the experience and Coll *et al.* (2004) also discuss the benefits of reflection before the experience itself. Smith *et al.,* (2007) also discuss the challenges of supporting students to reflect as consideration also needs to be given to how to support students at different stages and in different disciplines to reflect and how to foster deep reflection.

3.7 Inequality

A concern raised in some of the literature is that of unequal access to work experience opportunities (e.g. Clark *et al.,* 2015; Holmes, 2006; Irwin *et al.,* 2018; Klein and Weiss, 2011; Roberts, 2017; Siebert and Wilson, 2013; Weiss *et al.,* 2014). Given the growing importance of work experience for graduate employment there are real concerns about equal access to these opportunities. While careers services can assist students in finding work experience, according to Roberts (2017), internships can be inaccessible to those students without the connections and know how to get one. While some studies in the literature have focused on the impact of volunteering and unpaid work experience on employability, skills development or employment outcomes (e.g. Barton *et al.,* 2017; Clark *et al.,* 2015; Holmes, 2006), there remains the issue of whether some students are at a disadvantage in relation to their peers if they need to take non-relevant paid work out of financial necessity and are therefore not in a position to take unpaid experience.

Both Irwin *et al.* (2018) and Weiss *et al.* (2014) have indicated that relevancy of experience is valued by many employers when reviewing students' and graduates' experience, so the question of whether some students are potentially at a disadvantage is an important one. Unpaid work is problematic where only certain students can afford to undertake it and trades unions and student bodies have argued that those who cannot afford to may miss out on gaining the social capital needed to succeed in sectors such as museums (also discussed by Holmes, 2006) and the creative industries (discussed by Siebert and Wilson, 2013). Both HEIs and employers therefore have a role to play in ensuring that work experience opportunities are open to all students. Many universities are already addressing this through mentoring schemes and internship programmes. For example at the University of Edinburgh we have an established set of University internship programmes, *Employ.ed* which include an on-campus and SME programme and in the last two years we have introduced an Insights Programme for Widening Participation students to gain work experience, make connections and develop their professional behaviours.

3.8 Type of experience

A small number of studies have investigated the type of experience and potential benefits for students and graduates. For example Brooks and Youngson (2016) discuss the benefits of a placement over part-time work as students are likely to have more opportunities for their personal and professional development with their host employers (for example by attending company training courses). Evans *et al.* (2015) and Varghese *et al.* (2012) discuss placements in SMEs and how these offer an experience distinct from, for example, multinational firms, as students may have the opportunity to learn more about professional etiquette, workload management and what it takes to set up and run a business.

In relation to placements specifically, some studies have also noted how length of placement can have an impact on how much benefit students gain from their experience (discussed in Coll *et al.* 2009; Irwin *et al.,* 2018; Jackson, 2013; Moores and Reddy, 2012; Reddy and Moores, 2012; Silva *et al.,* 2016). Evidence from these studies is far from unanimous however; for example Silva *et al* concluded that 'thin' sandwich placements where students undertake the placement across the academic year outperform 'thick' placements which last for just one semester. Both Jackson (2013) and Moores and Reddy (2012) concluded that longer placements (in excess of nine months) had a more positive impact on students while Irwin *et al.* (2018) concluded that relevancy of experience appeared to be more important than placement

duration. They concluded that multiple short placements may be better than a single longer placement, as did Silva *et al.* (2016) who suggested that students would benefit from experiencing different functions and roles in diverse workplaces.

It has been argued by Evans *et al.,* (2015) that the majority of studies examining the benefits of work experience have focused mainly on placements and internships and other sources of experience such as part-time work have been largely ignored. They point to some of the important benefits of part-time work for students when employers are looking for candidates who can adapt readily to the world of work, as part-time work can be an important means of supporting this. However, as with placement experiences, they conclude that reflection on experience is important; evidence from Pennington *et al.,* (2013) also indicates that employers are willing to consider candidates with a variety of types of experience, as long as they can be shown to be relevant. In the same study however, 46% of the employers felt that candidates should take unpaid relevant work experience in preference to paid but unrelated work. Clearly this offers a mixed picture of the value or part-time work and warrants further investigation.

The value of work experience should also be considered alongside other experiences including volunteering and extracurricular activities. Studies by Wilton (2012) and Barton *et al.* (2017) both showed that students and graduates viewed their volunteering experiences positively and recognised its role in developing their self-confidence, experience and skills. This view is reinforced in a study by Hinchcliffe and Jolly (2011) of employers' perceptions, which concluded that paid work wasn't necessarily valued over other experiences such as volunteering. What mattered to employers in their study was the students' ability to demonstrate that they had tried new things, taken on responsibilities and demonstrated commitment, all of which can be supported through volunteering. Indeed, in some sectors volunteering may be the only way to gain experience and can be instrumental in eventually obtaining a paid graduate role, for example in the museums sector and creative industries as discussed by Holmes (2006). Barton *et al.* (2017) also discuss the role of volunteering as providing opportunities for *situated learning* when students don't have access to integrated work placements in their degree programme.

Finally, involvement in extracurricular activities can also impact on employability. In a study by Stuart *et al.* (2011), university alumni described their involvement in extracurricular activities as being key to developing self-identity, social networks and identifying potential career pathways. Furthermore employers in their study emphasised the importance of extracurricular activities as a means of differentiating candidates, providing evidence of cultural fit, leadership and commitment. Again, employers in this study stressed that candidates needed to be able to articulate how their experiences had benefitted them and how they were relevant to the employer.

It is clear therefore that a wide range of experience can have potential benefits for students if well organised and managed and if students are able to reflect on the lessons learned. While relevant work experience in industry is undoubtedly sought after, other experiences including part-time work, volunteering and extracurricular activities can be equally useful in supporting students to secure graduate employment.

3.9 Concluding remarks on literature review

This review of the literature on work experience in its very broadest sense has raised a number of issues that are pertinent to the work of careers services in supporting students to obtain and make the most of their experiences. Clearly, there is value to students in undertaking different types of work experience, although there are some mixed conclusions deriving from the literature around issues such as length of experience, relevancy, organisation and support for students undertaking experience, the importance of reflection and equal access to opportunities. Recommendations arising from this will be discussed in Section 8 of this report.

4. Methodology

4.1 Literature review

A wide range of the literature on work experience was reviewed for this project, beginning in 2017 and updated in late 2019 to include more recent studies on work experience including Irwin *et al.* (2018), Perkins (2018) and Silva *et al.* (2018). Denise Jackson of Edith Cowan University in Australia has written extensively on the topic of work-integrated learning and the benefits to students (e.g. Jackson, 2013; 2015; 2017; Jackson and Wilton, 2016; Jackson and Collings, 2018) and these were used as a basis for identifying other literature to review for the project. Beyond work integrated learning, literature on volunteering, part-time work and extracurricular experiences was also reviewed.

Artess *et al.* (2017) conducted an extensive review of the employability literature 2012-2016 and this surfaced many issues pertinent to this research project including the contested definitions of employability and career management skills and identified some current practice in HEIs in relation to work experience and again this paper served as a basis for identifying other literature to consult.

Finally a number of keyword searches were conducted using Google Scholar and the University's Library Catalogue, Discover@Ed, to identify source material.

4.2 Employer perceptions of work experience

This project used a mixed methods research approach to gather both quantitative and qualitative data from employers. Employers' views were gathered from the Careers Service's biennial survey of employers in 2017. This regular Careers Service survey captures feedback from a wide range of employers that recruit from the University of Edinburgh, representing a wide range of employers in terms of size and sector.

Feedback was sought from employers on a range of issues including their future needs with respect to skills, attributes and experienced required, feedback on how they felt these skills and attributes could be developed by students, their perceptions on the role of a degree in enhancing students' and graduates' employability, their perceptions of students from research-intensive universities and of the University of Edinburgh specifically. Feedback captured with regard to the skills and experience needed by employers is of direct relevance to this research project and some analysis of the survey data is provided in Section 5.

In addition to survey data, further in-depth insights gained was from 15 semi-structured interviews conducted with employers who actively recruit from the University and who represent a variety of sectors and employer sizes. A list of employers interviewed is provided in Appendix I. Again, within these interviews employers were asked about their skills requirements and some analysis of their responses is provided in Section 5.

4.3 Student and graduate perceptions of work experience

Quantitative and qualitative data was also collected from students and graduates. Students who were participating in the *Edinburgh Award* for part-time work during academic year 2017-18 were sent an online survey with questions to identify the type of work experience they were undertaking, whether they saw this as relevant to their future careers, their perceptions of how employers would view their experience and the skills they felt they were developing from their experience. A total of 60 students completed the survey and a list of the survey questions are provided in Appendix II. It is acknowledged that this sample was a convenience sample and is in no way representative of the student body at the University of Edinburgh overall, as it includes only those students actively engaged in the *Edinburgh Award*. It is often the most motivated and engaged students who engage with initiatives such as the *Edinburgh Award,* an issue that has been highlighted by Manski (1999) as the selection problem in the social sciences and this therefore represents a limitation to this research. Generalisations about the student body as a whole at the University of Edinburgh or indeed beyond cannot be made. Results from the student survey are provided in Section 6 of this report.

In addition to the student survey, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven University of Edinburgh graduates to explore the topic of work experience in more detail. In particular the interviews sought to investigate the type of work experience graduates had done and how useful this had been to

them in terms of the skills they developed and in supporting them to establish themselves in their careers after graduating. A list of interview questions is provided in Appendix III and results from the semi-structured interviews are presented in Section 7.

Again the graduates taking part in semi-structured interviews represents a convenience sample, with the graduates having an established relationship with our Careers Service, having previously indicated they were willing to 'give back' to the University in some way. Again no generalisations about the graduate population can be made from the data.

4.4 Data analysis

Quantitative data collected from the student survey was analysed using excel. The data was analysed to identify trends in the perceived value and purpose of work experience undertaken. Based on the small sample size (n=60), conclusions could not be drawn based on identifying factors such as gender and Widening Participation status.

The graduate semi-structured interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Interview participants each selected a pseudonym to be used in this report. From here, they were analysed via thematic analysis, which utilises coding to identify themes within the data. Codes were developed after a preliminary read-through of the data, from which themes began to emerge.

4.5 Information and data handling

All survey data was anonymous and data collected was treated in line with GDPR regulations. Interview data from graduates was also anonymised following transcribing and pseudonyms used in this report.

A summary of the key findings from the employer survey and interviews with the 15 employers is presented next in Section 5 followed by findings from the student survey (Section 6) and graduate semi-structured interviews (Section 7).

5. Key findings: Employer survey and interviews

In 2017 the University of Edinburgh Careers Service conducted a survey with employers and followed this up with in-depth interviews with 15 employers across a range of sectors to identify their current perceptions, including the skills requirements for the future and their perceptions on the value of extracurricular activities and work experience (University of Edinburgh Careers Service, 2017).

5.1 Skills required by employers

From the survey data, key skills requirements identified by employers included creativity, problem solving, critical and systems thinking. Taken together, some reports have termed these the *higher-order cognitive skills* (for example The British Academy, 2017; Skills Development Scotland, 2018; Universities Scotland, 2019). Alongside this, employers also cited the importance of factors including self-management, flexibility and resilience. These factors align with those discussed in many reports and modelling examining the future of work and *Fourth Industrial Revolution*, for example CBI (2017); Schwab (2017); Universities Scotland (2019); Universities UK (2018). Employers also indicated that attitude and mindset are important and again this aligns with much thinking on the future of work, where some reports have drawn on the work of Carol Dweck and the concept of the *Growth Mindset* (Dweck, 2006)[2], for example the World Economic Forum report of 2018 cited the importance of the growth mindset in the future of work (World Economic Forum, 2018).

5.2 Perceptions of co and extracurricular activities

Whilst employers were positive about disciplinary knowledge, they placed at least equal weighting on long-term and varied extracurricular activities and cited work experience as being one of the most important factors in recruiting, with relevant experience being highly valued. For some employers this could potentially mitigate for lower academic attainment. Employers were also asked about what advice they would give to students and responses given included advice for students to enhance their transition skills and acquire a breadth of experience, including in the workplace.

With regard to both co and extracurricular activities, every employer interviewed emphasised the importance of real-life experience for students to fully develop, with involvement in societies, sports clubs, volunteering and part-time work being seen as desirable. Levels of responsibility and long-term involvement in activities were also deemed important as a means to evidence commitment. Specifically employers viewed these activities as being key to developing skills in team work, problem solving, leadership, planning, organisation and communication skills (University of Edinburgh Careers Service, 2017).

5.3 Perceptions of work experience

In relation to work experience, again this was highlighted by all employers interviewed as an opportunity for students to develop employability skills and to apply these in a pressurised environment and for some this could potentially mitigate for lower academic attainment. In addition, some employers pointed out that work experience could give students positive examples of how they have put their skills to use and also positively influence their behaviour at assessment centres. This view aligns with the findings from Brooks and Youngson (2016) who concluded that involvement in work experience positively impacted on students' confidence and performance in recruitment activities.

On the subject of relevancy, which has been discussed by Irwin *et al.,* (2018) and Weiss *et al.,* (2014), findings from the interviews indicate that employers generally take a holistic approach to recruitment and students who have not had work experience relevant to their sector will not be at a disadvantage, especially if they work in a sector where it is difficult to get such experience. These are encouraging findings in light

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[2] It is acknowledged that the concept of the Growth Mindset is a divisive one and it is far beyond the scope of this project to explore this issue further here. Although the concept is cited in several reports relating to the future of work and the *Fourth Industrial Revolution*, the concept is not without its critics and indeed some researchers have identified issues in replicating Dweck's findings in subsequent experiments and research, for example Li and Bates (2017).

of concerns raised by Holmes (2006) and Siebert and Wilson (2013) about the potential need for relevant experience, however as one employer in the interviews acknowledged:

"While non-relevant experience doesn't put students at a disadvantage, relevant experience does put them at an advantage".

Clearly then, employers value all types of work experience but students may be at an advantage if they are able to source experience relevant to their field and this is an important message for students.

5.4 Concluding remarks on employer survey and interviews

In conclusion, from our employer survey and interviews, it is clear that employers value a wide range of experiences. Relevant work experience is clearly valued however not deemed to be essential, which is an encouraging message for students who might find it difficult to source relevant experience in their chosen sector.

There is also clear evidence that employers require a broad range of skills including many of those discussed in the literature on the future of work and *Fourth Industrial Revolution* including problem solving, creativity and critical thinking. These are valued alongside other attributes such as flexibility and resilience. Again these are important messages for students in supporting them to prepare for the future of work.

In the following sections we present results from the student survey and graduate semi-structured interviews and discuss the extent to which their perceptions align with those of the employers.

6. Key findings: Student survey

Students who were participating in an *Edinburgh Award* for part-time work in academic year 2017/18 were sent an optional online survey and 60 students responded. Respondents came from a range of degree programmes, years of study and types of work. Through undertaking the *Edinburgh Award*, a programme that encourages reflection and reflexivity in viewing aspects of student activities, respondents may have gained an improved appreciation for the value of their work experience. Indeed, research by Thomson *et al.* (2013) and Muldoon (2009) suggests that university awards for extracurricular activities have a positive impact on their perceived value among students.

6.1 Demographic information and types of part-time work

The majority of the sample was female 76.7% (n=46), a discrepancy commonly found in survey based research and well documented in the literature (e.g. research by Smith, 2008 who also provides a summary of the literature on this issue). Retail work was reported to be the most common type of part-time work, followed by hospitality and office-based jobs. Students selecting the 'other' category primarily worked in childcare or care for the elderly, along with others working as web developers, warehouse labourers and service assistants. Figure 6.1 below illustrates the range of employment roles for survey respondents.
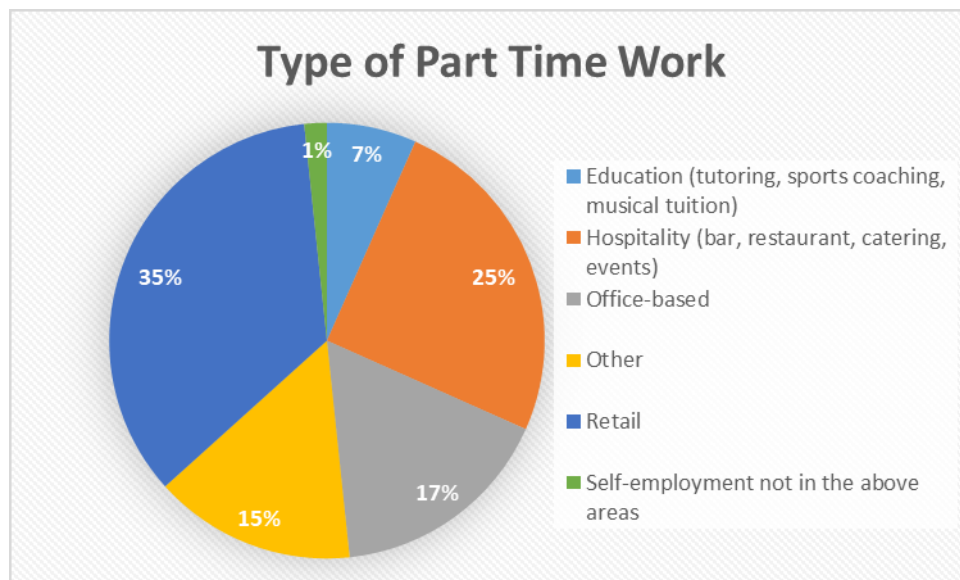

Figure 6.1: Type of part-time work undertaken by survey respondents

6.2 Skills developed

Respondents reported a variety of skills being developed over the course of their part-time work. Of the respondents, 76.7% (n=46) felt that their part-time work was contributing to the development of skills that would be useful in the future. Respondents also reported benefits in the form of earning money (91.7%; n=55), gaining experience (81.7%; n=49), developing skills (56.7%; n=34), meeting new people (40.0%; n=24), and doing something outside of university (41.7%; n=25). When asked what the primary skill developed was, communication and working under pressure emerged as the leading skills as illustrated in Figure 6.2.
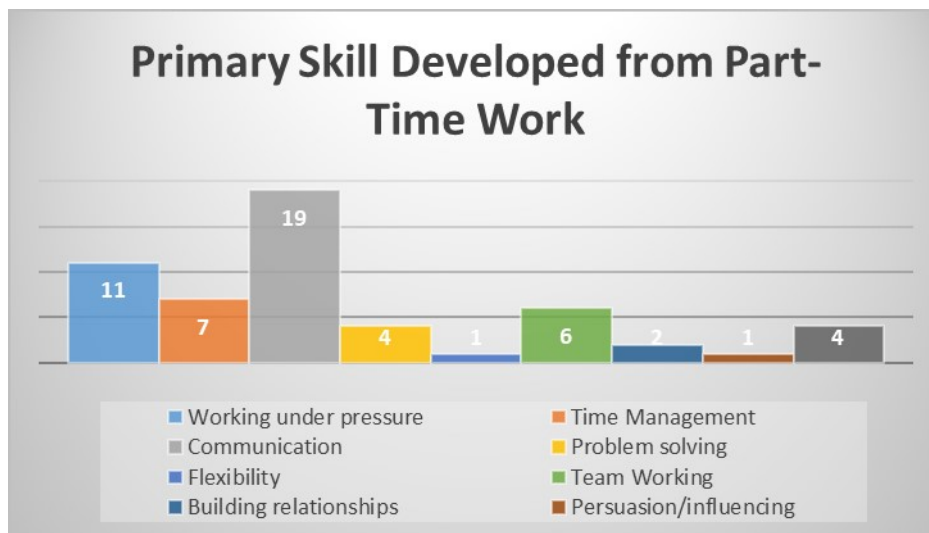
Figure 6.2: Primary skill developed through part-time work as reported by survey respondents.

Research of employers' perceptions similarly suggests the importance of interpersonal and communication based skills, with 57.8% of employers ranking it as the most important quality in a study by Hinchliffe & Jolly (2011). Clark *et al.*'s (2015) study similarly showed communication (74.4%) and interpersonal skills (79.0%) as the primary skills developed through extracurricular activities (including paid work). As multiple sources suggest, employers' evaluation may be more weighted towards successful reflection and communication of what makes the skills transferrable (e.g. Jackson, 2016; Barton *et al.*, 2017; Smith *et al.*, 2007; Thompson *et al.,* 2013).

There is some alignment with the findings from our employer survey. Students identified gaining skills in working under pressure, time management and flexibility, which align with what employers termed 'self-management'. A small number of respondents (n=4) also identified developing problem solving skills, which was a key requirement among employers. There are some discrepancies however; students didn't identify developing skills of creativity, critical and systems thinking and given the importance of these skills for the future of work, there is potentially some work to be done in making students more aware of the importance of these skills and the role of work experience in developing them.

6.3 Ranking of types of experience

The conception of a 'hierarchy' of work experience is partially supported by the data collected within this survey. The survey requested for respondents to rank employers' perceptions of value from one to five, with one being the most valuable. These rankings yielded average values of 2.25 – Directly Relevant Work Experience or Internship, 2.7 – Paid Part-time Work, 3.0 – Volunteering, 3.2 – Student Societies or Activities, and 2.9 – Other Activities. Graphs of the ranking distributions are shown below in Figures 6.3 to 6.7.
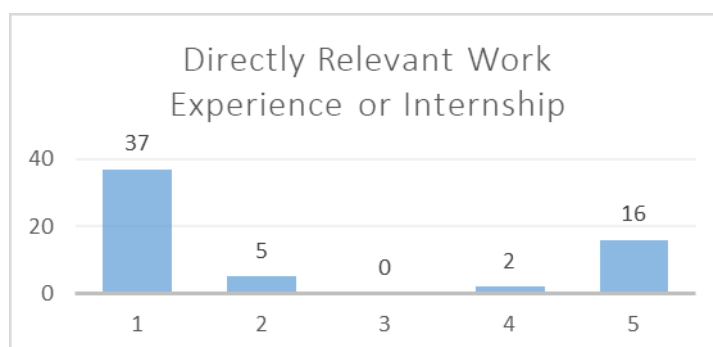

Figure 6.3: Respondents' ranking of employers' perceptions of the importance of directly relevant work experience or internship
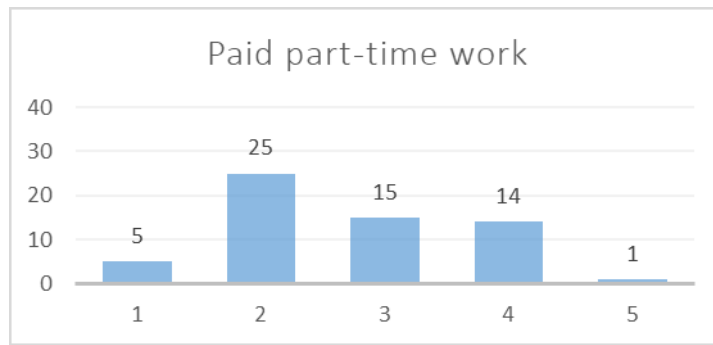
Figure 6.4: Respondents' ranking of employers' perceptions of the importance of paid part-time work
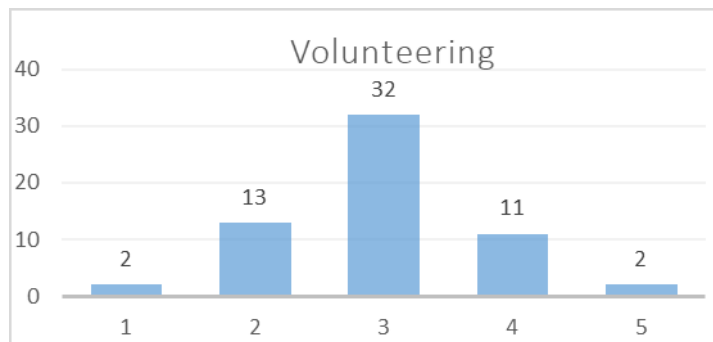

Figure 6.5: Respondents' ranking of employers' perceptions of the importance of volunteering
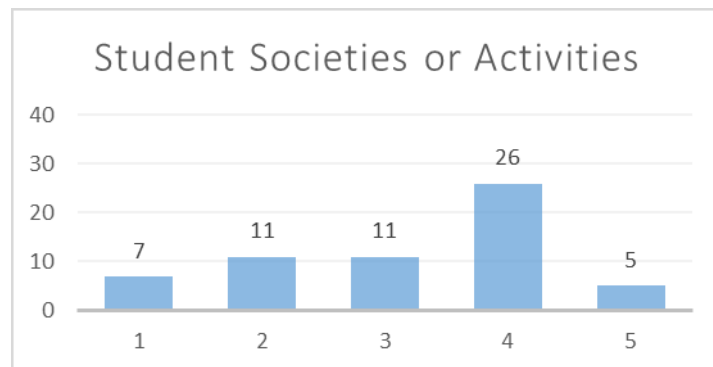

Figure 6.6: Respondents' ranking of employers' perceptions of the importance of student societies and activities
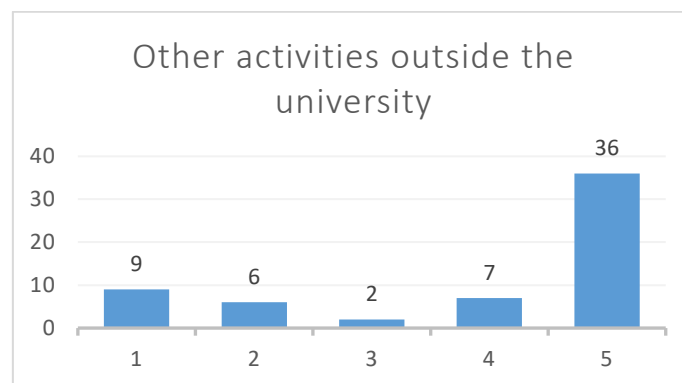

Figure 6.7: Respondents' ranking of employers' perceptions of the importance of other activities undertaken outside of university

When asked to rank the types of work experience most valued by future employers, respondents' rankings did favour modes of work experience deemed traditionally to be meaningful, i.e. directly relevant work experience or internship and paid part-time work. Based on these rankings, directly relevant work experience or internship emerges as highest valued form of student work. However, it is worth noting the significant (n=16) number of respondents who placed this category as the least important. This may be indicative of factors like sector and the availability of internships or directly relevant experience, or lack of, in some sectors. This has been discussed by both Holmes (2006) and Siebert & Wilson (2013) in relation to the museums sector and creative industries, for example. While a trend emerges suggesting discrepancies in the perceived value of work experience, it is unclear how much this was influenced by the ranking structure of the survey question itself, so caution must be taken in drawing any conclusions from this.

Again, there is a discrepancy between these findings and those from the employer survey. Our students identified relevant work experience as being the most highly valued while our employers indicated they valued a wide range of experiences, with a lack of relevant experience not putting students at a disadvantage. Again this suggests that there is potential to do more in making students aware of employers' views and the value of all types of experience.

6.4 Barriers to gaining work experience

The survey also inquired about the barriers to gaining traditionally high-value forms of work experience, such as internships. 43 respondents reported facing barriers to work experience or internships. These barriers included the work being unpaid (n=18), the opportunity cost of time spent doing unpaid work (n=25), distance need to travel to undertake the experience (n=16), and the associated costs of travelling and living in another location (n=23). As researchers including Siebert & Wilson (2013) and Holmes (2006) have suggested, unpaid internships and a scarcity of paid entry-level positions may contribute to excluding those without sufficient financial or social capital. It is therefore worth giving consideration to how careers services can support students to break down some of these barriers.

6.5 The opportunity cost of work experience

With the acknowledgement that 'a degree alone is not enough' (Dearing Report, 1997) and the stakes being raised in terms of what is needed to get a job (Tomlinson, 2008) comes the recognition that students need to engage in activities beyond their academic studies in order to develop themselves fully. However this is not without its drawbacks.

As one respondent noted in an optional text box in the survey:

"I think you need to extend you survey to cover the negative aspects of having a part time job at university. Whilst it does have many benefits both now and for future employment, it can also be incredibly challenging balancing uni and work commitments, having less time to socialise with friends and just generally having less time than others in your degree to complete your studying…"

This raises a significant point in the complexity of students' lives and the potential drawback of working during one's degree. It is therefore worth considering that along with the message about the benefits of work experience, we give thought to how to support students to find a healthy work-life balance and impress on them the need to gain a range of experiences but without them having to do everything or put themselves under unnecessary pressure.

6.6 Concluding remarks on findings from student survey

In conclusion, survey respondents identified a range of skills being developed through their part-time work although there is some discrepancy with the findings from our employer survey, especially with respect to the higher order cognitive skills of problem solving, creativity, critical and systems thinking. Students also perceived that employers would place most value on relevant work experience, whereas employers indicated that a wide range of experience is valuable.

Students also identified barriers to undertaking work experience and given its increasing importance, consideration needs to be given to how we remove some of these barriers and mitigate some of the negative aspects of gaining work experience and support students to find a healthy work-life balance.

In the next section we present findings from the graduate semi-structured interviews and examine how these findings align with those of employers and students.

7. Key findings: Graduate semi-structured interviews

The University of Edinburgh Careers Service interviewed seven recent graduates to gauge the influence of work experience on their transitions into the workplace after graduation. The interviewer used semi-structured questions focused around skills acquired and the utility of these skills in the workplace. All of the participants were employed at the time of interview and came from a variety of educational backgrounds.

7.1 Skills gained and their desirability

Interview participants reported a sense of the skills that they had gained and their utility in obtaining a job and entering the workplace after graduation. The skills gained from activities undertaken during university included: problem solving, communication, organisation, confidence, time management, maturity, valuing customer service, leadership, public speaking, and cross-cultural engagement. Some of the comments on skill acquisition spoke to the ability of the individual to enter and thrive in the workplace, for example:

"I think for me [I gained] a couple of things that I kinda lacked when I came to uni was the like self-belief, like confidence. I think everything I did like ended up benefitting me in one way or another."

Molly

"You know, the workplace is like quite dynamic and you need to understand like all these, all these things about like teamwork and about getting to know people and things like that are very useful in the workplace."

Duncan

The experiences of Molly and Duncan suggest the process of learning about oneself and the social environment of the workplace. As Holmes (2013) argues, entering the graduate workforce may require a 'becoming' within one's identity that grants acceptance into post-graduation employment circles. Reports of increased self-belief and adjustment to the workplace offer a significant claim to this type of identity shift.

In describing the perceptions of employers, participants reported that:

"It's become abundantly clear for me that the most important thing now is people want a well-rounded person. It's far more important for employers to find someone that will get on well with their current team, than someone who's necessarily the brightest bulb."

And:

"…when you get to the stage where people have hired you, you can ask, like, what was it that appealed to you, a lot of them said, we loved, like that you went out to and expanded, you know, you put extra strings on your bow, it made it really difficult not to hire you."

Ruraidh

Ruraidh's responses suggest that employers value a wide range of experiences, a view which aligns with those in our employer survey.

7.2 Value of student societies, volunteering, and part-time work

Participants spoke very favourably of experience with societies, volunteering, and non-degree related part-time work. Participants reported the utility of student society involvement, volunteering, and part-time work in providing skills that feature less prominently in education. Examples of this sentiment include:

"You can pull on Uni work for technical skills. But when it comes to teaming and personal skills and presenting skills, that's when your society and you lesser-thought-of work experience can come in."

Beth

"You're having to flex your styles when you're talking to different kinds of people which is something that's huge in business and they give managers specific training on, kind of thing. And that's the stuff that's maybe difficult to teach"

Beth

"I learnt a lot from my degree but I think a lot of the kind of bread and butter of like what you should be good at in a career, I don't know if you can learn it by purely academic work."

Molly

"Business Society was great because I met some of my closest friends to this day. I got an unbelievable experience and, you know, I've mentioned briefly being treasurer a bit in every interview I've ever done."

Ruraidh

"I think society work and paid work are kind of equivalent in employers minds… I did society things as well but I would count that as work experience across the board."

Beth

These quotes suggest the multi-faceted benefits drawn from forms of work experience that may be undervalued in comparison to internships and relevant employment. Additionally, these quotes highlight an ability to reflect upon one's experience and evaluate its sources of value. This aligns with the findings of Artess *et al*. (2017) whose meta-analysis of employability research identified the value of reflection and articulation in demonstrating employability.

Additionally, participants reported value from gaining access to a sense of greater community, for example:

"I think two people who meet each other say 'Oh we've both done Engineers without Borders', you are usually very keen to kind of work with each other."

Duncan

"That one really helped with my verbal skills, cause I wasn't shy or anything, but coming from another country it was different the way people speak here, so it was just nice to see how to interact with local people at the time."

David

The findings of Wilton (2012) and Barton *et al.* (2017) suggest the value of volunteering in developing self-confidence, experience, and skills. This sentiment is similarly reflected by Hinchliffe & Jolly (2011), who suggest that volunteering is valued similarly to paid work based on the demonstrated willingness to try new things and take on responsibility.

Given that graduates were able to reflect on their experiences and see the value of these in supporting their development and transition into the workplace, consideration should be given to how we support students to reflect on their experiences as much as we do in encouraging them to gain that experience. This may be particularly pertinent to non-traditional students as Stuart *et al.* (2011) have noted that participation in university-based extracurricular activities may be less available to them. Supporting these students to reflect on the value of paid but non-relevant part-time work may therefore be particularly important.

7.3 Holistic growth and development

Participants drew heavily upon the role of part-time work in their personal development. As demonstrated in the quotes below, this was highlighted in terms of gaining maturity and adapting to face challenges:

"In terms of personal growth, my first job, the job as a sales assistant… I just went from a very steep learning curve of being an immature body and started to become, you know, a bit more of a level headed man, and that was just massive in terms of proportionality."

Ruraidh

"If I didn't have the placement, first of all I don't think I would've been as motivated to look for a job. [...] I probably would have caved in earlier, given up earlier."

<div align="right">David</div>

Thompson *et al.* (2013) emphasise the role of extracurricular activities in supporting personal development. Viewing this link between self-actualisation of identity and career prospects may therefore present an important dimension to understanding the benefits of student activities.

A study by Stuart *et al.* (2011) identifies the importance of extracurricular activities in cultivating self-identity, social networks, and career pathways. This was further discussed in terms of broadening individuals' social circles and life outside of university by some of our participants, for example:

"I think university can be quite insular at times… A lot of people have kind of the same opinions and attitudes and stuff. And I think making friends outside of University is, is what's kind of helped me shape my world view, like coming out of it."

<div align="right">Molly</div>

"[work] gave me, like, something else to think about other than uni, and kind of helped me realise there is a world out there, outside of uni, which I really valued. But, the sort of how fixed it was, it meant that when I was doing my deadlines… it did make it harder that I had to do specific times."

<div align="right">Melissa</div>

These statements suggest the role of extracurricular activities in creating a life outside of the university, but as Melissa suggests, this increased perspective may come along with added difficulties in balancing one's responsibilities, an issue which was also highlighted in our student survey.

7.4 Personal values and career aspirations

In discussing the value of work experience during university, the interview participants highlighted the importance of gauging the suitability of type of work to their desired lifestyle and values. In particular, lifestyle arose as a concern when entering different workplaces, for example:

"I learnt a lot of skills that they do, but I also learnt that they have a really, really bad work/life balance, and I thought that's not something I want, work/life balance is very important to me."

<div align="right">Ruaridh</div>

"They had a lot of projects and there were so many deadlines to keep up with, so that was, like, very intense, very crazy, there was a lot of overtime spent there, so it gave me, sort of like… understanding the way the world really works."

<div align="right">David</div>

Some participants also described a type of 'trial and error' involved in navigating the job market, for example:

"So the different things I did were all just trying to get ideas of what different places and industries were like. And then that influenced what I then decided to apply for."

<div align="right">Duncan</div>

"I've had a lot of work experience and a lot of them have shown me either what's not important to me or perhaps what is important to me but I can't find in those kind of environments."

<div align="right">Sophie</div>

Individual preference and expectations of the workplace emerge as significant aspects of planning a career. For these participants, undergraduate work experience served the dual purpose of gaining skills while also gaining a sense of what environments they could see themselves in.

In deciding the career path to pursue, personal values also arose as a consideration taken on while working, for example.

"You know, I want to do something ultimately that helps other people rather than… just simply working for my own benefit in terms of finances or just finding a job that is purely for my enjoyment."

Sophie

"It taught me that I loved working with young people, and that interaction, and it taught me that I didn't so much love necessarily education… I know that for me my passion comes from somewhere else, like more creative side of things"

Melissa

These findings go beyond purely skill development as identified by our employer and student participants and suggest that work experience is critical in supporting students to test out different work environments and identify those that align, or not, with their values and career aspirations. This is another important message to impart to students where a period of experience in an environment that does not align with their values or leads to a change of career plan might be perceived as negative or indeed a failure. Such experiences are actually positive as they support students to identify their personal values and work environments that align with them and to make well-informed decisions based on that information.

7.5 Concluding remarks on graduate semi-structured interviews

Our graduate participants identified a wide range of benefits from undertaking work experience which included, but was not limited to, skills development as identified by our student and employer participants. Additional benefits that our graduates identified included being able to test out different work environments and identify those aligned with their values and the role of experience in supporting the transition into post-graduation employment and formation of a graduate identity. This finding aligns with that of Jackson (2017) who discussed the role of work-integrated learning in supporting students to develop a pre-professional identity.

This is an interesting finding and one which may warrant further investigation in light of current discussions on the future of work and *Fourth Industrial Revolution*. Many discussions are focused on the nature of work and what it means to be human in an age of artificial intelligence, perhaps a broader and more philosophical discussion than some of the traditional career development theories might enable. There was also evidence that our graduates were able to deeply reflect on the value of their experiences in order to identify and articulate its role in supporting the development of their identity. Supporting students to see the value of work experience in supporting the development of identity, as well as skill development through reflection potentially offers a valuable way forward in supporting students to thrive in the future of work and will be discussed in the recommendations of this report.

8. Conclusions and recommendations

8.1 Answers to research questions

8.1.1 What constitutes meaningful work experience to students and graduates? Is there a 'hierarchy' of experiences? For example is the formal internship type of experience valued above other types of experience?

Our survey data indicates that students placed most value on directly relevant internships or work experience, which supports the notion of a 'hierarchy' of experiences. Graduates who took part in semi-structured interviews were also able to reflect on their range of experiences and identified that there was value in all of their experiences, including part-time work, volunteering and extracurricular activities. Clearly all of these activities constitute meaningful work experience and whole students may perceive that an internship is some sort of 'gold standard', reflections of graduates in the workplace in this study would suggest otherwise.

8.1.2 What attributes do employers look for in students and graduates? What value do they place on different types of work experience?

Our survey data indicates that employers value a wide range of skills, in particular the higher-order cognitive skills of problem solving, creativity, critical and systems thinking along with other factors including self-management, flexibility and resilience; skills and attributes which are discussed in many reports relating to the future of work and *Fourth Industrial Revolution.*

Employers clearly valued a wide range of experiences and encouragingly, were keen to stress that a lack of directly relevant work experience would not put students at a disadvantage. This aligns with the findings from graduate semi-structured interviews, where graduates were clear on the benefits of a wide range of experiences. Key for both the employers and graduates was reflection and being able to articulate the benefits of the experience and this may be particularly important for students who wish to enter sectors where directly relevant experience is difficult to obtain.

8.1.3 What skills do students and graduates believe they gain from their work experience?

Students reported that they gained a wide range of skills from their work experience including communication, working under pressure, time management, team working and problem solving. There is some alignment with what our graduates reported in interviews, but the graduates' perceptions of skills developed was more wide-ranging encompassing problem solving, communication, organisation, time management, leadership and public speaking alongside other factors including confidence, maturity and cross-cultural engagement.

Graduates' assessments of the benefits of their work experience went far beyond skill development with graduates identifying the role their experiences played in supporting them to develop a graduate identity and to make the transition into the workplace, alongside being able to test out different work environments and clarify their personal values and career aspirations. The value of reflection in supporting students and graduates to be able to articulate what they have gained from their experience in order to derive maximum benefit from it is therefore clear.

8.1.4 Are there any barriers to students being able to undertake work experience?

Students identified a range of barriers to being able to undertake work experience including the experience being unpaid, the opportunity cost of time spent doing the work experience, the distance required to travel to undertake the experience and the costs involved in this and in living/working in another location.

8.2 Limitations of this research

As discussed in the Methodology in Section 4 of this report, there are several limitations to this study largely due to the use of convenience samples. Convenience sampling was used to select employers, students and graduates to participate in this study.

Employers were drawn from those who were actively recruiting from the University of Edinburgh at the time of the research and who therefore had an established relationship with us. Although they represented a range of sectors and organisation sizes, generalisations about employers as a whole cannot be made.

Students participating in the survey were drawn from the cohort who were undertaking the *Edinburgh Award* for part-time work in academic year 2017/18 and may therefore represent a group of motivated and engaged students and is in no way representative of the University of Edinburgh student body or indeed beyond. Due to the small sample size (n=60) we were unable to draw any conclusions in relation to demographic data such as gender, Widening Participation status or country of domicile.

Our graduates also represent a very small sample size (n=7) and again were a convenience sample as all had an established relationship with us through prior alumni engagement activities and all had indicated that they were willing to 'give back' to the University in some way. Our interviewer noted that at the time of the interviews all were employed, settled and happy in their roles and may therefore not represent a balanced view of the benefits of work experience. Generalisations about the graduate population as a whole therefore cannot be made.

8.3 Recommendations for careers services

From our research and review of the work experience literature we make some recommendations for careers services in supporting students in this area.

8.3.1 Clear terminology

Clear terminology on what constitutes work experience. This issue has been discussed by Perkins (2018) and given findings from our employer and student surveys we recommend that services are clear about what constitutes work experience and that employers value all types of experience. A glossary of work experience terms could be a useful tool for students.

8.3.2 Clear communication with students on employers' requirements

There was some discrepancy between the views of employers and students on the type of experience valued and on skills development and we recommend that services clearly communicate the views of employers to students. In particular around the value of all types of experience and on the skills that employers require. This is particularly important in light of discussions around the future of work and Fourth Industrial Revolution.

8.3.3 Placement management and support

It's clear from the literature that placement organisation and management plays a key role in the student experience. A placement or experience per se does not guarantee a positive benefit and experience for the student and adequate support needs to be provided before, during and after the experience. Where formal placements are offered HEIs should ensure these are properly supported but there is no reason to end there and we recommend that services consider how to best support students undertaking less structured and informal experiences too.

8.3.4 Understanding and removing barriers to obtaining work experience

The issue of inequality has been raised in the literature in relation to sectors where it is the norm to undertake periods of unpaid experience (e.g. Homes, 2006; Siebert & Wilson, 2013). Unpaid experience was identified as a barrier by our survey respondents, along with the opportunity costs of time needed to undertake experience, distance to travel and associated costs. It is therefore recommended that services work to understand and where possible support students to remove some of these barriers and level the playing field in relation to work experience.

8.3.5 Supporting students to enjoy a healthy work-life balance

Student wellbeing is receiving increasing media attention and HEIs are increasingly responding to the wellbeing agenda. Some of our survey respondents identified the opportunity cost of undertaking work experience and one respondent noted in the comments the negative impact this can have on students'

work-life balance when they have many other commitments and demands on their time. It is therefore recommended that while services encourage students to obtain a range of experience, at the same time they should also be clear that this does not mean needing to do everything and that students consider how they can achieve a healthy work-life balance.

8.3.6 Supporting students with reflection

There is clear evidence from both the literature and our graduate semi-structured interviews of the value of reflection in supporting students to derive benefit from their work experience, in particular around the concept of identity formation. Services should consider how they can support students to derive maximum benefit from their experiences, whatever they choose to do through reflection before, during and after the experience. This aligns with the advice from our employer participants who advised students to consider how they articulate the benefits of their work experience and is of particular importance to those students who are unable to obtain relevant work experience. For work experience to work it needs reflection, reflection, reflection!

8.4 Recommendations for future research

We have developed some recommendations for future research based both on the findings from this study and the limitations we identified above.

8.4.1 More research into the benefits of and barriers to work experience in the wider student body

A limitation we identified in this study was the small sample size of students (n=60) and the fact they were a convenience sample. There would be value in exploring the benefits of work experience amongst a wider group of students and not restricted to those currently undertaking part-time work or engaged in a university award scheme. In particular there may be value in exploring the barriers to undertaking work experience amongst those students who are not currently engaged in such activities.

8.4.2 More research with under and/or unemployed graduates

Our interviewer noted that all of our graduates participating in semi-structured interviews were employed at the time of the interviews and settled and happy in their roles. This may not represent a balanced view on the value of work experience and coupled with the small sample size (n=7) this could warrant further investigation. In particular there would be value in exploring this in-depth with graduates who are under or unemployed to present a more balanced view.

8.4.3 More research on the role of work experience in forming graduate identity

A potentially exciting finding arising from the graduate semi-structured interviews is the role that work experience played in them forming an identity and making the transition into the post-graduation workplace. Graduates were also able to identify other benefits beyond skill development including other attributes such as maturity and confidence and in clarifying their personal values and career aspirations.

In light of current discussions around the future of work and *Fourth Industrial Revolution* there is value in exploring this topic further. The future of work is uncertain and individuals will need a range of skills in order to thrive along with other attributes such as confidence, motivation and skills in self-management and lifelong learning. If work experience is indeed instrumental in supporting students and graduates to develop these skills and mindsets then this is an important message to impart to students to support them to prepare for the future of work. Of course our work as careers services should be evidence-based so we recommend more research in this area.

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10. Appendices

10.1 Appendix I: List of employers participating in interviews

Attacat

Capital City Partnerships

Codebase

Diageo

EY

Jaguar Land Rover

Management Development Services

Pinsent Masons

Procter & Gamble

Royal London Group

Skyscanner

Scottish Parliament Information Centre

Standard Life

Teach First

Thermo Fisher

10.2 Appendix II: Student survey questions

Questions for undergraduates on Edinburgh Award (Work Experience)

Year of study:

Degree course:

Gender:

Mature Student: Y/N

Are you identified by the university as a Widening Participation student?

Yes/No/Unsure (with link/pop-up – You may be a WP student if you have been supported by LEAPS or the Sutton Trust or similar organisation, if you are the first in your family to attend university, if you are a carer, have a disability, or are a care-leaver. If any of these apply, please answer yes.)

What type of part-time job are you doing?

- Hospitality (bar, café, restaurant, hotel, events)

- Retail

- Office

- Education (coaching/tutoring)

- Self-employment not in the above areas: please specify

- Other: please specify

Is your part-time job connected to your subject of study?

Do you view your part-time job as being connected to your future career?

Before starting the job, what were your main reasons for undertaking this part-time work? (tick all that apply)

- To earn money for essential expenses

- To earn extra money for non-essential expenses

- To get work experience

- To have something to do outside university

- To meet people and build a network

- Other: please specify

Now that you are doing the work, what do you think the main benefits are? [tick all that apply]

- Earning extra money

- Gaining experience in a work environment

- Developing skills

- Meeting people and building a network

- Doing something outside your studies

- Other: please specify

Whether or not you see your work experience as being connected to your future career area, what skills do you think you are developing which might help you in the future: (please rank those that apply to you, where 1 is most important)

- Time management

- Communication skills

- Problem-solving

- Team-working

- Creativity

- Flexibility

- Working under pressure

- Leadership

- Persuasion/influencing

- Building relationships

Please tell us any skills you think you are developing which are not included in the above list:

As well as your part-time work, have you also undertaken any work experience/internships whether paid or not?

Y/N

Have any of the following barriers prevented you undertaking other internships or experiences?

- It was unpaid.

- It was too far away.

- It would have cost too much (in living expenses) to do it.

Please tell us more if you would like to:

Are you involved in any of the following activities while you are a student?

- Volunteering [please tell us what]

- Student society [please tell us what]

- Student representation (EUSA, class rep etc)

- Other society or activity outside the university [please tell us what]

If you answered yes to the above question, do you think those activities could help you get a job in the future?

Y/N

If yes, then why? Tell us what skills or experience you are gaining that might be useful?

Of all the activities you do, which do you think will be most useful in your future career and why?

- Paid part-time work

- Work experience/internships

- Volunteering

- Student societies or activities

- Other activities outside the university

As far as you are aware, which activities that you could undertake as a student would be most valued by a future employer? Please rank

- Paid part-time work

- Work experience/internships

- Volunteering

- Student societies or activities

- Other activities outside the university

10.3 Appendix III: Graduate semi-structured interview questions

Background: degree subject (classification?); graduating year.

Tell me about your employment since graduating.

Is this where you wanted to be? (Planned career; chance; planned happenstance?) (In role or field you were hoping for?)

What kind of work experience had you gained by the time you graduated? (explore duration, variety etc.)

What other activities were you involved in as a student?

What skills did you develop as a result of participating in work/other activities?

To what extent can you attribute your career success to your experiences?

Intentionality: did you deliberately seek out work experience which you thought would be useful to your future career in some way?

Were there any experiences you missed out on (why?) that you think would have made a difference to your career?

What would you do differently if you could go back?

Anything else you'd like to tell me about that we haven't covered?