Viewpoint

How academics can play a more influential role during a year-in-industry placement: A contemporary critique and call for action

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Abstract
Universities worldwide are tasked with producing employable graduates capable of operating in evolving, complex, and global labour markets. Research into the effectiveness of year-in-industry placements to facilitate such objectives often portrays the dominant actors as students, employers, managers, and (de)centralised placement teams. Framing this as our point of departure, we propose that academics can play a more influential role. Our essay discusses the challenges for academics of designing, delivering, and assessing a year-in-industry placement module. Next, we consider the opportunities for students to enhance their self-perceived employability. We conclude with a call for innovative thinking, knowledge sharing, and empirical research.

Keywords
Curriculum, module design, assessment, academics, higher education, year-in-industry, placement, students, self-perceived employability

Setting the scene

Universities are paying significant attention to how engagement activities can enhance student satisfaction and experience (Mooney, 2022). A dominant theme is the increased focus on graduate employability metrics during the degree (Langan and Harris, 2019). From the student perspective, self-perceived employability is defined as, "the individual's perception of his or her possibility of obtaining and maintaining employment" (Vanhercke et al., 2014: 594). Moreover, self-perceived employability has been empirically shown to be influenced by six forms of capital (social, cultural, psychological, scholastic, market-value, skills), career advice, and career ownership (Donald et al., 2019). However, there is an acknowledgement of the interplay between personal and structural factors of self-perceived employability (Vanhercke et al., 2014), captured via person, context, and time dimensions of a sustainable career (De Vos et al., 2020).

One approach to enhancing students' self-perceived employability is a year-in-industry placement (herewith referred to as a placement) (Otache and Edopkolor, 2022). The placement forms part of a sandwich degree, whereby a traditional 3-year undergraduate course is supplemented by an additional placement year before the final year of study. A placement is an augmented work experience whereby the university supports their students, and module completion contributes towards the final degree classification or title. Jones and Wang, 2023: 1) observed how such placements have, "a more powerful impact on student performance compared to international study placements abroad". However, not all placements offer the same value to subjective career outcomes of students (Inceoglu et al., 2019), and transitions to remote and hybrid working in response to Covid-19 pandemic restrictions posed socio-digital

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challenges for many placement students (Dewi, 2022; Hughes and Davis, 2021).

Another challenge is that the dominant actors of placements are often portrayed as the students, employers, managers, and (de)centralised placement teams (Vélez and Giner, 2015). Students typically view their primary relationship during the placement as with their employer, meaning they can often be unwilling or resistant to engage with the university during this phase of their degree. Inceoglu et al. (2019) suggest that students feel this way because they view the placement as a career transition and an opportunity for career identity construction. Yet, we believe academics can play a more influential role since the interaction between different actors can determine placement success and students' self-perceived employability outcomes (Narayanan et al., 2010; Vélez and Giner, 2015).

Framing this as our point of departure, our essay discusses (i) module design, delivery, and assessment, (ii) challenges for academics, (iii) opportunities for students, and (iv) concluding thoughts calling for innovative thinking, knowledge sharing, and empirical research.

Module design, delivery, and assessment

A feature that distinguishes placements from other kinds of work experience is that students are assessed in some way, usually by completing a corresponding university module. However, deciding what is to be assessed depends on the goal(s) and learning outcomes that the placement is considered to deliver. Module design, delivery, and assessment subsequently rely on context-specific ways to achieve authentic assessment (Manville et al., 2022). For example, securing and fulfilling the placement might be considered the primary goal in competitive labour markets, so placement completion is assessed on a pass-or-fail basis. Other popular approaches are underpinned by similarly objective perspectives of placement 'success', often involving assessing the student *post*-placement through tools such as portfolios and presentations that showcase achievements (Perusso and Baaken, 2020). While such approaches have value because they encourage students to recognise accomplishments and identify self-perceived employability, they also have limitations.

First, they rely on post-hoc rationalisation of experiences, which can be affected by cognitive bias (Walentynowicz et al., 2018) and overall satisfaction with the placement experience. Poor role specification, lack of opportunity, misalignment of personalities, or a clash in student-organisation values, can all negatively influence a student's post-placement perceptions of their employability. That can mean that the employer 'actor' plays a disproportionately influential role in swaying a student's perceptions of their employability (along with their associated module outcome!). Second, they overlook a vital

opportunity to 'engage pedagogy' in the placement (Greenwood-Hau, 2021).

Consequently, we propose an alternative approach to module design, delivery and assessment, underpinned by the view that placements can contribute to students' subjective employability in different ways. For some students, placements provide vital work experience for a CV or disciplinarily relevant achievements. For others, they help them shortlist future career directions, surface skills, or highlight development needs. For others, they serve a combination of purposes (Jackson, 2020). Subsequently, our alternative approach focuses on the placement journey and the learning that occurs through consolidating experience with knowledge (Greenwood-Hau, 2021). One way to approach this is to measure students' perceptions of their competencies, goals, confidence, and achievements at different points in the placement (e.g. pre-, mid-, and post-placement) through questionnaires and associated reflective exercises (Hughes, 2020). 360-degree feedback opportunities from workplace colleagues can be incorporated into the process, and students can be encouraged to use this feedback and their reflections to benchmark and track their progress, think about successes alongside development needs, and consider tangible actions that they can take *during* the placement itself (see Hughes, 2022, for an example).

Additionally, embedding reflective assessments into placement modules can help re-establish reluctant relationships between students and their academic tutors because the assessment offers a purpose for reconnecting, which students value. Through formative assessment feedback and the allocation of an academic 'placement tutor', academics can help students identify *what* they have learned and achieved, *how* they have learned it, and *where* they can develop further. We believe that ongoing assessment and guidance throughout the placement can help students to digest feedback and (re-)evaluate development needs, career plans, and/or next steps. In contrast, waiting until the end of the placement misses intervention opportunities that can change the course of a placement experience.

Against this assessment backdrop, academics can play a valuable mentoring role during the placement journey. Academics have disciplinary expertise that can help students consider how placement tasks align with course knowledge. They can also help normalise common experiences (e.g. the use of specialist jargon or workload fluctuations). Moreover, academics with personal experience in a particular field can use their knowledge to help broker conversations between students and managers about possible in-placement opportunities such as secondments or particular projects. We, therefore, believe that module design, delivery, and assessment are pivotal in influencing students' self-perceived employability and that academics

can play a fundamental role by using such tools to shape a student's cognitive rationalisation of the placement experience. However, we also need to consider the challenges that academics might encounter when attempting to play a more significant role during the placement year.

Challenges for academics

Academic placement tutors must understand that some students sign non-disclosure agreements prohibiting the sharing of sensitive information. Placement students also have significantly different experiences from each other, which need to be accounted for to ensure equity in the assessment process (Inceoglu et al., 2019), and in tutor-student matching.

Additionally, students often pay a lower tuition fee during their placement year than for their other undergraduate study years (Rogers, 2022). University management may then perceive an increased availability of academics for other student cohorts, which could be a barrier to delivering high-quality curriculum content and tutoring support to placement students. However, we posit that additional resource investment is worthwhile for three interrelated reasons.

First, the students who need career-related support the most are those least likely to proactively seek it from university career services (Donald et al., 2018). Second, the mandatory nature of the placement module, when combined with specific learning outcomes and assessment methods, can help to enhance social mobility efforts by increasing the self-perceived employability of all students (Jackson, 2020). Third, placement schemes of this kind can lead to academic engagement with organisations that can foster serendipitous research collaborations and knowledge transfer partnerships, which can yield symbiotic benefits for universities, employers, and students alike (Franco et al., 2019; Hughes et al., 2021).

Another challenge is knowledge sharing and collaboration between different actors with competing agendas. Buckholtz and Donald (2022) highlight how universities compete for league table rankings linked to student satisfaction and employability outcomes; whilst employers compete for early career talent and reputational status. We agree with their call for win-win partnerships and believe that academics have a role to play in this ecosystem. Furthermore, the kinds of tutor roles advocated in this essay will likely suit academics interested in engaging with organisations, which may necessitate skills training (Hughes et al., 2021). Our focus now shifts to the opportunities the placement module delivery can yield for students.

Opportunities for students

Donald and colleagues (2018; 2019) showed that the year of study impacts students' self-perceptions of employability, whereby perceptions are lower in the final year of study compared to the penultimate year of study on a 3-year undergraduate degree. Students reported via interviews that this was caused by increased awareness of external labour market factors (e.g. competition for jobs, rejected applications, etc.). Similarly, Hughes (2022) captured challenges with poor person-organisation fit and critical feedback during placements. These findings suggest the influence of social cognitive career theory, which "emphasises that career- and study-related decision making are influenced by feedback and feed-forward mechanisms and by intra- and inter-personal, historical, and cotemporaneous dimensions" (Bennet et al., 2020: 750).

The placement module can potentially normalise these experiences by fostering dialogue between students. The development of personal resources in the classroom can enhance students' ability to learn and develop outside the classroom (Case et al., 2022). Peer learning as supplemental instruction could also complement the curriculum to enhance social mobility and self-perceived employability (Donald and Ford, 2022). There is an opportunity for students to take ownership of brokering the relationships between different parties (e.g. lecturers, placement teams, organisations), which we believe has the potential to provide a sense of agency, increased confidence, and leadership capabilities (all determinants of self-perceived employability).

Academics could map student trajectories across the placement (e.g. pre-placement, mid-placement, end of placement) via a mixture of self-reported and manager-reported questionnaires, whereby data could be accumulated over time at the student and cohort levels (Hughes, 2022). The opportunity would then exist for students to compare their performance and employability markers against benchmark data from their peers or previous cohorts. Comparing manager scores with self-perceived scores of employability markers can also be beneficial since 360-degree feedback has been shown to enhance student learning (Salvador, 2022). The impact may also be significant since an empirical study involving circa 3000 managers and 200 organisations found that students completing a placement reported lower self-perceived employability levels than their manager's assessment (Hughes, 2022).

Another opportunity for students comes from the chance to author reflective essays as part of the module assessment. Reflective essays can encourage students to embrace a growth mindset, whereby the actions they take for improvement based on feedback they receive is of greater significance than the feedback itself. Storytelling via personal narratives can also help students reflect on feedback, construct a personal development plan, and communicate their learning experiences to prospective employers (Sherwood, 2020). The sharing of these narratives, when

combined with the quantitative benchmarking data, can also help students who might perceive their abilities in a specific area to be low, whilst the data shows they are 'above average'. Alternatively, self-perceptions that are overestimated can be adjusted accordingly. These opportunities further emphasize the influence of social cognitive career theory on career- and study-related decision-making (Bennet et al., 2020).

The output from the placement module of the personal development plan, combined with industry experience, can then enable the student to pursue self-improvement either on their own or in partnership with the university careers service or a mentor from industry during their final year of undergraduate study. Academics could also share the cohort results with the university career service to highlight areas where students are predominantly struggling. The career service could then run sessions for students targeting these aspects or communicate these gaps to the industry and ask for support in recognition that university career services are currently struggling to meet the increased demand for their services caused by the Covid-19 pandemic (Donald et al., 2022). There is also an opportunity to promote other university support services, given that three in four students and recent graduates reported reduced levels of self-perceived well-being, with additional concerns about their future employment prospects (Donald and Jackson, 2022).

Concluding thoughts

We believe academics can be more influential in enhancing students' self-perceived employability and satisfaction outcomes during a placement. The time has come for innovative thinking and knowledge sharing around the design, delivery, and assessment of placement modules. Empirical data can help to determine the effectiveness of interventions compared to benchmark metrics. Moreover, accumulating data across cohorts can enable students to compare their performance against their peers while helping academics identify areas for future module improvement. We hope this essay will act as a catalyst for academics to enhance placement modules for the benefit of all stakeholders.

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