**Accrediting high school students part-time work, to support more effective transitions**

**to, through and beyond university**

**Abstract**

Models of accrediting work-based learning are now commonplace in universities. The purpose of this viewpoint paper is to highlight an opportunity for universities to not only accredit students’ part-time work against the degree award, but also to extend the process into schools by accrediting the part-time work undertaken by year 12 and 13 students against their future degree studies. The operations and benefit of adopting such an approach from the perspective of all stakeholders is discussed. By accrediting year 12 and 13 students, and giving appropriate unit credit against the subsequent degree studies provides universities with enhanced relationships, potential student buy-in and thereby, may increase recruitment. It also brings the employability agenda to the forefront and aids students’ transition into university. The approach described here offers universities a unique opportunity to, not only develop relationships with schools and colleges, but to encourage buy-in for students to progress onto degree programmes. While students’ part-time work activities have received much academic scrutiny, the suggestion of accrediting pre-university students’ work experience to gain accreditation from future degree studies offers a unique proposition for universities to consider. It also presents a number of challenges to make it work effectively and these too are outlined.

**Article Type**: Comment

**Keywords**: Accreditation; work experience; student buy-in;

**Accrediting students’ part-time work: Take one step backwards to gain university buy-in**

**Introduction**

In their recent viewpoint article, Evans and Richardson (2017) suggested that an opportunity exists for universities to accredit students’ part-time work activities undertaken while studying for a degree. This was based on the premise that part-time work undertaken by students provides the skills, attitudes and behaviours demanded by employers. As an alternative therefore, to providing the typical work-based opportunities for students such as placements and internships, universities could look to integrate and accredit students’ part-time work, into the degree programme.

The proposal put forward in this paper is for universities to extend this approach into schools and colleges, to similarly accredit the part-time work of those students. College and school sixth-form students will often be doing the same type of jobs before going to university, as they do during their degree studies. Some who continue living at home while at university, will potentially retain the same job that was commenced at school or college, throughout the degree period. If universities can accredit the part-time work students undertake while studying for their degree, against those degree studies, then there is also an opportunity to accredit any work activity students complete before entering university, also against the degree.

Universities therefore, have the opportunity, to work with school and college students to accredit individuals’ work activities, against the degree, to establish and build a symbiotic relationship. The aim of this paper is to challenge Higher Education providers by proposing the accreditation of school and college students’ part-time work activity against their subsequent degree studies. The advantages of enhanced stakeholder relationships and transition into higher education are discussed.

**The current proposition: Accrediting university students’ part-time work**

Increasing numbers of university students are working part-time while studying (Boyce and Stone, 2015), often due to financial burdens (Crockford et al., 2015). While this can negatively impact upon study demands and academic performance, especially where long hours are undertaken (Curtis, 2007; Robotham, 2012), part-time work activity not only familiarises students with the world of work (Billet and Ovens, 2007) but also helps develop skills, attitudes and behaviours that are demanded by employers (Evans et al., 2015). Students are not only orientating themselves to the world of work, but also accumulating appropriate skills from their work activities that make them more employable graduates (Hills et al., 2003; Martin and McCabe, 2007).

An initial review of the skill needs of part-time jobs that students typically undertake such as hospitality, bar work, events, sales (see for example: student-jobs.co.uk, studentjob.co.uk) and comparing them to the demands of graduate positions (see for example: graduate-jobs.com, milkround.com), highlights several similarities in person specification requirements, including effective communication, problem-solving and decision-making, team-working and delivering customer service.

The skills being developed in these part-time positions are therefore often those demanded by businesses for graduate jobs (CMI, 2014). As Davies (2000) and Evans and Richardson (2017) recognise, this yields an opportunity for universities to not only welcome and encourage, but embrace and integrate the part-time work activities of their students, by accrediting the part-time work-based experience against degree learning outcomes, thereby reinforcing the employment credentials of their graduates.

Universities are increasingly recognising the need for demonstrating the commercial credibility of their degrees and raising the employability skills of their students (Andrews and Higson, 2008; Tomlinson, 2007). Work-based learning is becoming an integral element of degree studies (Lester and Costley, 2010), as universities look to develop employer-demanded skills in their graduates (Finch et al., 2013; McMurray et al., 2016). While this typically comprises placements and internships, especially vital for vocationally-oriented disciplines such as nursing and education, students themselves are obtaining requisite work experience through their part-time employment (Evans et al., 2014). The opportunity for universities to accredit this part-time work as an integral element of the degree award, therefore seems appropriate.

Models of accreditation of prior work experience (APEL) are now commonplace in the higher education sector, not only as a means of facilitating non-standard entry to award programmes (Hamill and Sutherland, 1994), but also as a substitute for a placement activity (Tempest et al., 2007). Chisholm and Davies (2007) even feel that full accreditation for awards should be permitted. Nonetheless, tensions still exist regarding the perceived ‘commoditisation’ of student experience through recognisable blocks of knowledge, and the facilitation of like-for-like accreditation against awards (Dismore et al., 2011). While McLernon and Hughes (2004) argue for a more structured, formalised process of accrediting work experience, inherent complexity can be off-putting for staff in engaging with the APEL process (Gallacher and Feutrie, 2003). Armsby et al. (2006) therefore advocate flexibility, with the tutor an integral advisor, to support students’ learning throughout the process. Moreover, Dagavaarian and Lakin (2003) emphasise that accreditation should only be given for relevant knowledge and therefore exploration of context, reflection upon experience and subsequent writing up, are important (Chirema, 2006; Lester, 2007; Mortari, 2013).

However, it is the reflection upon the part-time work that is a crucial element in the process of recognising and accrediting work experience (Higgins, 2011). Critical reflection is also important to enable students to learn from the experience (Bulman et al., 2014). Yet, as Gray (2007) notes, critical reflection is a difficult skill, especially since students reflecting on work experience tend to focus on the more technical skills, and ignore the softer ones (Smith et al., 2007). Consequently, students need to be supported by tutors (Coulson and Harvey, 2013), not only to raise awareness of work activities, but also to encourage improvements in practice (Morris-Day, 2013) and self-development (Davis et al., 2014).

Tutors will also need to support students in writing journal documents to facilitate the critical reflection. Nonetheless, portfolios can be produced electronically (Wright and Stallworth, 2002), or journals developed through student blogging (Chong, 2010; Stoker, 2015; Yang and Chang, 2012), both of which reduce the administrative burden and potentially raise levels of student commitment. These can be enhanced by encouraging an online community environment (Ferguson et al., 2016; Kuo, 2017) to enable students to communicate and support each other in the writing and reflection process.

**The new proposition: Universities take one-step backwards into schools**

The part-time work that students at university typically undertake, is often of the same type and level to that of sixth-form students studying ‘A’ Levels or similarly recognised qualifications. According to Rokicka (2014), nearly one-third of students aged 16+ are working part-time while studying. For students who continue to live at home while at university, they may well continue with the same part-time job that was commenced while in the sixth-form. The same opportunity to develop a portfolio, or journal of work experience, together with a critical commentary, should also therefore be available to those sixth-form students, who are working part-time while studying.

Therefore, the proposal presented here, is for university staff to engage with schools and colleges to support those students, currently working part-time, in the development of a portfolio of work experience, together with the requisite critical reflection. This can be used to gain partial or unit accreditation against their future degree studies. This could also partially be used to reduce the cost of the tuition fee, which might be important where students are price-sensitive. Universities could potentially reduce delivery costs later in the degree programme by avoiding the necessity to support students with a work placement experience. It could also reduce the workload of the students once on-degree, important in balancing their study-work-social commitments.

Once a school agrees to participate in the scheme, an outline process would include a member of university faculty leading an introductory workshop for those interested students who are currently in part-time employment to explain the scheme and describe the recording and assessment requirements. Students would be given access to the university’s virtual learning environment (VLE), which would contain all key information relating to the scheme, exemplars of portfolios and templates to guide the students’ work. Regular half-day follow-up workshops, led by university staff, might be provided within the school to assess progress and provide further guidance on the process. School staff would provide encouragement to students, rather than get involved in the tuition or assessment process. This does however, limit the number of schools that the university might be able to engage with, since it is dependent upon appropriate faculty being available to lead the process, engage with the schools, and assess the completed student portfolios. Universities often have a small number of relationships with local schools who have actively supported progression. The accreditation of students’ part-time work offers an opportunity for universities to develop progression relationships with a wider range of schools, and potentially support widening participation.

Critical reflection on the work experience is particularly important though, and should be integral to the students learning process (Herrington et al., 2014). However, Quinton and Smallbone (2010) note that schools have limited opportunities to engage in critical reflective practice, possibly due to student numbers and orientation to assessment outcomes measurements. University tutors would therefore need to provide instruction on reflection and on the completion of an appropriate portfolio. As Durkin et al. (2016) argue, innovative activities in universities need resourcing to derive successful outcomes, and so the proposal requires adequate resourcing to be successful and staff also need to be supported in the process.

The proposal helps to develop the relationship between the school, student and the university, something universities have traditionally done badly (Klie, 2013), although, as Waskowski (2015) notes, relationships with stakeholders are particular complex in most business sectors. Biaton (2015) highlights the importance to universities of developing relationships, through the participation and involvement of stakeholders, especially potential students. By interacting with students at school level, the university helps to build a relationship base early in the lifecycle (Oluseye, 2014) and creates mutual added-value for those concerned (Ramachandran, 2010). However, developing relationships is largely dependent upon effective communication channels being established (Filip, 2012; Nicholls et al., 1995) and university tutors, working alongside the school students on the proposed activity, will help enhance this. Additionally, the development of inter-personal relationships between school students and university tutors can help drive loyalty (El-Manstrly, 2016). Loyalty is typically derived from a complex mix of factors, although Liu et al (2011) note that the level of customer-intimacy enhances trust and customer tie-in. In addition, the accreditation of students’ part-time work against the degree will add-value in the relationship, with the potential reduction in cost and workload at university, increasing the cost-benefit outcomes, and thus potentially increasing buy-in.

The proposed activity could help students with the transition to university, as they will have developed a closer connection with university life. One of the criticisms of school leavers entering university is how inadequately prepared academically they feel (Setlalantoa, 2013). Thomas (2012) therefore highlights the benefits of early engagement with students by universities to prepare them for the subsequent academic rigours. Maunder et al. (2012) recognise that this removes some of the uncertainty associated with going to university. Knox (2005) notes that students who undertook an introductory module benefited from a smoother transition from college to university. Early engagement gives school students a greater level of awareness of what is expected on the degree, an important element in the transition process (Berger and Malaney, 2003). Similar to the proposal presented in this paper, Bolt and Graber (2010) describe a successfully delivered university programme to year 12 students, providing a preparatory module that received credits in the degree programme once students were admitted.

The student journal suggested in this proposal is one of the primary sources of development and forms a basis for future self-development, both as an academic learner and a professional (Davis et al., 2014). Students can therefore retain and update accordingly as they proceed through the degree programme, completing a portfolio that will enhance graduate employment prospects. In addition, it also encourages critical reflection, something students at university often struggle with at first (Tate and Swords, 2013).

The proposal does not mean students could join later in the degree programme, using credit transfer to jump a stage, since this typically causes students problems with developing critical analysis skills (Millman, 2013), important to gaining a higher classification

**Conclusion**

The proposal described in this paper is attractive to all involved stakeholders. School students develop a tangible product in the portfolio of work experience that provides them with a base for recording subsequent work experience, which should help support future employment aspirations. With employability at the forefront of the proposal, raised awareness by the students could improve graduate prospects over the long-term (Ehiyazatyan and Barraclough, 2009). Students need to promote the skills developed through part-time work to graduate employers; the portfolio gives them a record from which to draw examples of practice. They also benefit from the relationship with the university in gaining some unit accreditation against the degree and also from working with tutors. In doing so, students gain insight into the work expectation while on the degree and this may help reduce anxiety and assist with transition to university and degree studies.

Schools could develop a more tangible relationship with the university compared to attendance at careers days and similar liaison activities, through the proposed enhanced provision at year 12 and progression for their students onto a degree programme.

One of the criticisms of employers about their recruits, especially for graduate positions, is the emphasis that applicants place on their academic study, rather than any relevant work experience that they have gained or how that might relate to the position sought (Evans et al., 2015). This programme puts a greater emphasis on the value of work experience from the outset of university engagement.

The tangible reward for students of part tuition fee remission, should result in greater buy-in for the university. The university gains from working with potential students at an early point, maximising the opportunity for developing a relationship which should improve recruitment. In addition, the relationship should also improve students’ transition to university and their grasp of critical reflection and thinking skills.

While some argue that accreditation should be contextualised around studies and be deemed of equivalent to the award being given (Gallacher and Feutrie, 2003), it is not an element of curriculum that is being accredited in this proposal, but work experience which is common for those in part-time jobs while studying for ‘A’ Levels or a degree. Nonetheless, the proposal presented here is a viewpoint of the authors, that needs to be implemented as a pilot study. The proposal could also be extended to include those students on the Young Enterprise Scheme (see: <https://www.young-enterprise.org.uk/>), which already extends from primary school children to university students. The programme is primarily geared to providing young people with employability skills, incorporating career development, personal planning, financial acumen and personality assessments, many of which can be found in a typical first-year undergraduate personal development module. In addition, the Young Enterprise Company Programme aimed at college students provides insight and experience of running a business and covers a range of skills such as marketing, financial planning, branding and entrepreneurship.

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