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# Beyond Placement Extinction: Coming Up For Air

**Authors, Francesca Walker, Employability and Alumni Fellow at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) - and Michael Bowerman, Research Assistant at UCLan are conducting an on-going study on the factors influencing a sample of UCLan's students' decisions in taking up work placements. The present article summarises the findings and implications of their research.**

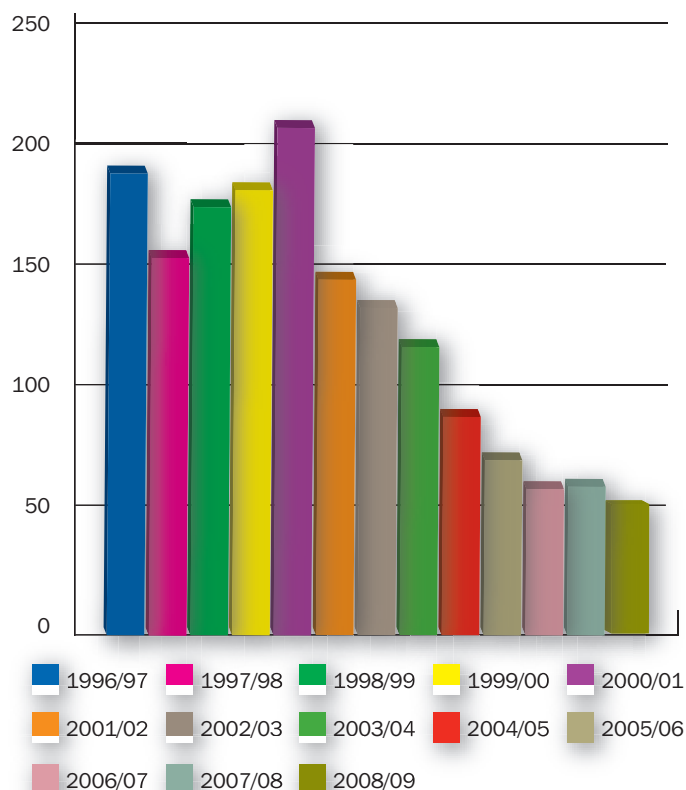
**Their findings show that there is a variety of reasons affecting these decisions - ranging from student motivation to financial and emotional factors - and point to the need for individual institutions to actively support students in accessing work placements. The economic effects of the recession have made this a priority, and the authors point to interventions made by UCLan in the light of their research, and highlight the scope for their further development.**

## Introduction and Background

Over the last ten years, the Lancashire Business School and the School of Sports, Tourism and the Outdoors at UCLan, have experienced a decline in students undertaking work or industrial placements. We define a work or industrial placement as being part of a sandwich degree, over 48 weeks, in which the student is a formal employee of an organisation and for which they receive a salary.

Figure 1 below maps the downward trend, with the notable year being 2000/01, the year that compulsory placements became optional. We wanted to understand this decline and what we could do to stop the downward trend. This article covers our findings and the interventions that we have introduced.

**Figure 1. Faculty of Management - Students placed 1996/97 - 2008/09**



**Methodology**

We commenced our study in November 2008. Our aim was to ensure that we gained the views from as many students as possible within the two schools. To guarantee a good response we opted for paper questionnaires, visiting classes and asking students to complete them while we waited. We surveyed all years, First, Second, Third (who had opted out of their placement), Third Years on Placement and Fourth years, who had completed a placement.

This approach resulted in 670 student responses, with the detail shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2. Number of student responses per year group category**

Year Group	Responses
First Years	283
Second Years	113
Third Year (Finalists who opted out)	180
Third Years on Placement	25
Fourth Years	69
Total	670

**Why we surveyed all years**

First Years – Our aim was to obtain the initial views of students who have pre-conceived ideas about the course and the option of an industrial placement.

Second Years – At this point the students start their placement search. This group provided a snapshot of current views about placement searches.

Third Year Finalists who opted out – By comparing this group with the fourth years it was possible to gather data on why students had chosen to opt out of their placement and whether that decision had impacted on their employability.

Third Year Students on Placement – This group provided an insight into the experiences of students undertaking a placement, gathering data on what had been learned, what skills needed development and what, if anything, the students would have done differently.

Fourth Year Finalists – This group provided further insight into the views of students in their final year

who were able to provide a reflective account of their experiences on placement and whether this had made a difference to their employability. The questions asked related to a number of issues, some of which were:

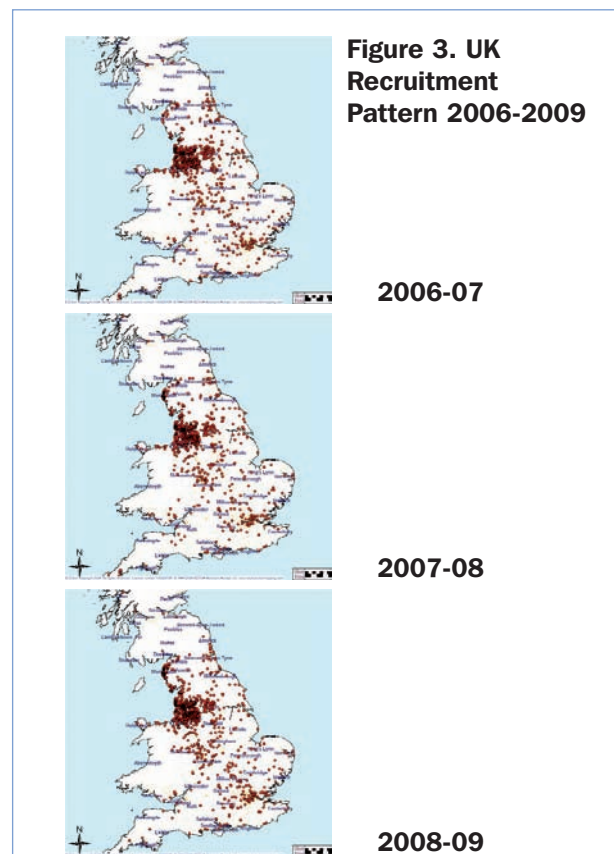
- Placement length – too short, too long or just right;
- Student mobility – how far from home were they prepared to travel;
- Their views of the value of work experience and whether they thought that employers wanted this from students;
- Whether they were in part-time work and whether that work was related to their course of study.

**Findings 2008/09**

There were a number of findings from the first year of study, some of which are noted below:

(a) Student Mobility

This study highlighted the fact that student mobility for UK students within the Faculty of Management at UCLan was proving to be a barrier to undertaking a placement. Many of the students were from the local area, a recruitment pattern that is increasing. Figure 3 below maps the recruitment pattern of UK students to the two schools over a three year period. Preston is in the centre of the highest density of dots.



Students were more likely to be mobile (i.e. travel more than 30 miles from their homes) when accommodation was found for them. We found that views changed radically from the first years who were willing and eager to travel away from home, to the second and third years, when the cost of travel and the fact that they would be living independently became a reality.

(b) Finding the 'Right Role'

Students indicated that a major reason for not undertaking a work placement was that they were unable to find the right role. It is clear that third years on placement and fourth year students considered that early application for placements would have provided them with a wider variety of choice and therefore assisted in finding the 'right role'. In short, student motivation was a major issue.

(c) Students in Part-time Employment

The last grant funded university courses were over a decade ago, which has increased necessity for students to work on a part-time basis to supplement their incomes. We found that students were selecting part time work which often corresponded to their academic subject areas. Therefore, they opted to remain within in their part-time roles and complete their courses rather than lose a role that they may not be able to get back in the future.

(d) Key Influencers

Students noted that their key influencers were the sixth form tutors, who provide advice and guidance on the right course to take.

(e) The Importance of Work Experience for Employers

All students, without exception noted that work experience was key to getting a graduate role in the future. The level of importance differed slightly, from 'very important' to 'quite important', but the value was recognised.

**Interventions**

To address some of these issues, the research team embarked on a number of interventions:

*Student Mobility*

Encouraging students to talk to students already on placement living away from home/university to share their experiences and promote the value of independent living.

*Finding the Right Role*

A significant support system was put in place to allow students access to staff at any time (within reason), this included monitoring the number of applications made to placements, overseeing the quality of applications and general encouragement.

*Students in Part-time Employment*

To encourage students to engage not just with their part-time roles, but with other options, 'Employer Forums' were developed to introduce their views on what they were looking for from a student and what they found was lacking.

*Key Influencers*

An annual '6th Form' forum was resurrected to allow our staff to meet the tutors who were the key influencers, to explain the value of work placements.

**Findings 2009/10**

Although the findings from 2008/09 were powerful and able to influence the way in which we supported students, a funding bid from the CEPPL at the University of Plymouth enabled us to extend the research and survey students again in 2009/10, allowing us to measure the impact of the interventions that we had introduced and develop some new ones.

Using the 2008/09 methodology, but taking the lessons learnt from the first year and other studies, we were able to revise some of the questions asked. We surveyed a further 650 students, bringing the total number of students surveyed across the two years to 1,320.

We wanted to know whether the recession had an impact on their view of a need to get work experience.

**Figure 4. Has the recession changed your opinion on the value of a placement?**

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3 F	Year 3 P	Final
Yes - I feel it is more important now	29%	34%	35%	58%	55%
No	69%	64%	60%	38%	43%
Yes - I feel it is less important now	2%	2%	5%	4%	3%

The results showed that there is a changing view as students in their final years see that it is increasingly important, this is highlighted by the fact that when asked **'Has the recession changed your opinion on the value of a placement?'**, the students responded as show in Figure 4.

Although many of the findings were the same over the two years, we saw a difference in some areas:

#### *Parents of Generation Y*

The parents of Generation Y are incredibly important, as more students choose to live at home, their key influencers have changed.

#### *Students want to do a Placement*

But they need more support than ever from academics and employability teams.

#### *Future Thinking*

The recession is beginning to influence the students, to the extent that they are starting to see that a degree is not enough, they need to think ahead and get the edge on those students who have no work experience. A placement fulfils this.

#### *Too much Competition for Placements*

Competition is rising for placement roles. We are seeing robust selection processes with employers seeking placement students who already have work experience. Their part-time work experience is now essential, even for those looking to enhance their future prospects by getting a placement.

#### *Living at Home is even more Important!*

As fees rise, living at home is even more important to our students, so we need to work harder to engage with local employers.

### **What are we doing to help our students?**

Building on the interventions from 2008/09, we have developed additional interventions to assist the students as they make their applications:

- Mock Assessment Centres
- Development of online psychometric tests
- Mock interviews
- Peer to Peer Views
- *The Parent's Survival Guide*
- Using social networking to raise student engagement
- Targeting of first year students
- Monitoring the number of applications for placement per student

- Guerrilla marketing
- Local marketing campaigns to engage local employers with the placement process
- Production of a 'by students, for students' film.

If you are reading this and wondering (a) whether this is happening anywhere else and (b), whether our interventions are working, the answer is 'Yes'. Our research has included presentations at *PlaceNet* (a national body that promotes and supports placement tutors and staff), ASET (a professional body for placement and employability staff) and the CEPPL Conference at the University of Plymouth. At these sessions we gathered the views of universities from around the country, many of whom are experiencing the same issues as ourselves.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Our research is not yet over; we consider it to be a work in progress. We have discovered that we (those who support students) have stayed the same, but:

- Students have changed;
- The climate has changed;
- Communication has changed;
- Employers are seeing a rich field of talent – only the best will do.

Generation Y have experienced a great deal of support throughout their educational careers, our assumption that they are suddenly independent and able to work their way through the minefield that is the path to the workplace and work experience is letting them down. Our research has shown that greater support is required for our students. We now have to work harder and communicate better; we consider this to have been a wake-up call for us all.

### **Contacts**

If you would like a copy of the first paper 'Approaching Placement Extinction' (Walker and Ferguson), or would like to find out more about this project, please contact Francesca Walker [fdwalker@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:fdwalker@uclan.ac.uk)

**ASET** can be found at [www.asetonline.org/](http://www.asetonline.org/)

**PlaceNet** can be found at [www.placenet.org.uk/](http://www.placenet.org.uk/) or join the discussions on LinkedIn – PlaceNet - Placements in Industry

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