Understanding the Learning-Working Nexus in Higher Education

Dr Margaret Wood with Arijit Chatterjee, York St John University

Abstract

This paper explores the nature of the dynamic between higher education students' work-related experiences and their engagement with undergraduate study.

Tutors in higher education can sometimes bemoan the fact that their students are compelled to work, often substantial hours, in order to finance their university studies. The view of this which is often expressed is that this is to the detriment of their academic studies. The aim of this paper is to re-orientate this discourse by taking an appreciative view of the relationship between student engagement in the workplace and the benefits of this for academic study. The focus is therefore a positive one in seeing links between the combination of work and study and benefits produced such as motivation and opportunities to gain transferable skills relevant to study and lifelong learning.

Student engagement with work-related experiences can take many forms. It may be work that is not immediately related to the requirements of their programme of study for example a casual job taken to help to finance the studies, or it may be as a planned work-experience placement component to their course. Drawing on data from a small-scale qualitative research study of the views and experiences of a sample of full-time undergraduate students at one university, this paper examines how work-related experience including student volunteering, paid employment and work placement, appears to have the power to motivate and give more meaning to academic study.

The research has uncovered some of the factors that influence students' perceptions of the value and importance of different aspects of their academic study and its wider relevance to their lives. The paper shares this understanding from the student perspective as uncovered through their narrative accounts of their varied work-related experiences. It seeks to shed light on questions of: how students draw on their skills and experiences from the workplace to make sense of and give meaning to their higher education studies, career goals and aspirations; how tutors recognise and value work-related learning in the higher education curriculum and transfer this more directly into academic study; and how higher education and employment can be seen as complementary rather than in conflict.

Key words: employment, higher education, learning, experience, work, study.

Background and rationale

Writing in the Independent newspaper in August 2010, Garner wrote of an 'unprecedented scramble' for university places for the academic year 2010/11.The article suggested that:

> The move could be the start of a long-term policy of fewer university places, with ministers encouraging youngsters to put more emphasis on learning the skills industry needs to compete in the modern world.

This suggestion of putting more emphasis on work-related learning linked to the needs of employers might be considered somewhat unhelpful in tending to reinforce notions of a binary divide between the academic learning that goes on in universities and learning which is more applied. What stimulated the research reported in this article was a desire to begin to develop a more insightful understanding of the synergies between academic study and work-related learning as seen through the eyes of undergraduate students, many of whom are attempting to combine full-time study with some form of employment. This is often because of the need to be self-supporting financially, meaning that employment must run alongside the study to make this affordable and possible. Where the hours worked conflict with scheduled classes or availability of time to complete assignments then students can experience stress and tension between the worlds of work and academia. Sometimes students on the course undertake work offered by the university, such as a student ambassador role which involves them representing the university at different events such as Open Days. This is a paid role which is intended to fit around the students' studies. All students on this particular degree course undertake a work placement module as a component of their studies and this is the module which therefore tends to be seen by students as having a much stronger applied nature in relation to the world of work.

Work is therefore part of the experience of study for students on this degree course through the work placement module. It is also a daily reality and necessity for many of them in order to provide the finance to make study on the course

affordable. This research is motivated by a desire to develop an understanding from the students' perspectives of the work-study nexus with the aim of appreciating the possibilities and opportunities rather than seeing the two in opposition. Our interest as researchers lies in how we can learn from this in order to design curricula for higher education which value and use workplace learning more centrally and move beyond the 'theoretical' and 'applied' divide which can sometimes rather unhelpfully influence and compartmentalise our thinking. The introduction of Foundation degrees with their emphasis on work-related learning and work-based tasks has brought together academic study and work-based practice, giving learning in and from the workplace a central role in academic study. However, on the more 'traditional' undergraduate degree course such as the one reported on here, there is less emphasis on vocational application than would characterise a Foundation degree course and the work place focus tends to be seen as mostly delivered through the work placement module, normally taken in the second year of study. Toohey (1999:18) discussed approaches to learning in higher education and the importance of opportunities for students to make sense of 'academic' knowledge in terms of what they already know from day-to-day experiences. On the basis of the data we have collected, we argue for the need to design the higher education curriculum in ways which relate to students' wider experiences in their everyday lives and for many students these include experiences in the workplace. We suggest that this may help to promote student engagement with learning when, as higher education tutors we appreciate the knowledge and skills gained from students' wider experiences of work as being relevant and transferable to academic study. Barnett and Coate (2005:128) define engagement as:

> ...a relational concept: it indicates an identity, to a significant degree, between the student and the act of learning.

Perhaps a leaning towards placing emphasis on the importance of abstract knowledge can devalue the knowledge which students bring from their wider experiences of work and thus may not help to create engagement with the learning. This may be quite a claim to make but one which is informed by the

experiences of one of the researchers who is also a tutor on the course and which appears to be supported by the research data gathered so far. Returning to the idea of putting more emphasis on applied learning and skills needed for future employment in what Barnett and Coate (2005:137) refer to as the context of life in a changing and challenging world, it is suggested that:

> If higher education curricula are going to help students develop the kinds of qualities and dispositions that the twenty-first century calls for, we have suggested then students need to be understood as human beings with their own unfolding 'takes' on the world. If students as human beings are not just to survive but add to the world... then they will have to be able to engage with the world and put in something of themselves.

In order to develop our understanding of the student 'take' on the world it is vital to see this through their eyes and to hear their views of how they make sense of engagement with the world of work and how they perceive that this articulates with the academic curriculum. By taking an appreciative approach, the researchers aim, in the words of Barnett and Coate, to better understand students as human beings. By recognising the synergy rather than potential for conflict between these different aspects of their lives it is hoped that the research might in some small way help students not just to survive and get through the course, but to engage them in learning which will add value to their studies, enable them to make a positive contribution and 'add to the world' in the future. There can be considerable wider benefits to be accrued from employment during the term time (Curtis, 2007). According to Watts and Pickering (2000), students engaged in term time employment acquire personal transferable skills which can enhance their employability and increase their confidence in the field of work. Moreover, according to Harvey et al (1998), term time employment of students can assist them in developing their employability skills, which might be useful in their subsequent job interviews. Some of the positive effects of student employment during academic term time include: acquisition of transferable skills (Watts and Pickering, 2000; Lucas and Lamont, 1998), organisational skills (Watts and Pickering, 2000; Dustmann et al., 1996), interpersonal skills (Lucas

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and Lamont, 1998), self-reliance and confidence (Steinberg et al., 1981; Watts and Pickering, 2000), managing relationships with employers (Mizen, 1992), and enhanced employability benefits (Watts and Pickering, 2000).

By taking an appreciative approach, the researchers do not deny the reality of students' work pressures and the stresses this can bring for students who may be struggling to balance the demands of paid employment and the demands of academic study at undergraduate level. Engagement in employment can have both positive and negative impact on students' lives and academic performance (Broadbridge and Swanson, 2005; Winkler, 2009) and work pressures can bring disruption to study patterns. Some of the negative aspects can include missing lectures and difficulty in concentrating during lectures (Curtis and Shani, 2002), deterioration in academic performance (Carney et al., 2005), inter-role conflict and stress (Vickers et al., 2003), tiredness and depression (Rolfe, 2002).

It is hoped that this research study may make some contribution to the development of a better sense of how all this relates to what Barnett (2007:20) refers to as the 'will to learn'. Barnett describes the will as the foundation of educational energy and links this to the student's sense of identity. We argue that what we have referred to as the divide of work and study can sap energy and the will to learn when the two are seen as oppositional. Recognising, drawing on and valuing life experience, knowledge and skills gained from the different work contexts in which students participate may be a way to affirm the student, promote engagement in learning and to connect the experiences of work and study and so strengthening the 'will to learn'.

Design and conduct of the study

The research strategy falls within the broad phenomenological approach, centring on students' perceptions and explanations of their experiences of the social world. According to Denscombe (2003:98) the everyday world of lived

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experience lies at the very heart of what phenomenologists wish to study. Qualitative data was collected via email interviewing in asynchronous mode and an appreciative inquiry approach was adopted.

Knight (2002:184) sees the potential of appreciative inquiry as a systematic approach to thinking about strengths, beginning as it does with an appreciation of what is good. Appreciative inquiry was therefore selected as a tool for building a positive appreciation of the nature of the relationship between work and higher education study. The researchers' own ontological position is based on the values of respect for the students and appreciation of the complexities and tensions they can face in attempting to balance higher education study with the need to work in order to finance this. In order to avoid the construction of a deficit discourse from the perspective of a tutor seeing work as an unwelcome interference and distraction from academic study, an appreciative approach seeking also to construct an understanding as seen and experienced by the students was adopted. Reed (2007:2) suggests that appreciative inquiry can be seen straightforwardly as an approach which:

> …concentrates on exploring ideas that people have about what is valuable in what they do and then tries to work out ways in which this can be built on – the emphasis is firmly on appreciating the activities and responses of people, rather than concentrating on their problems.

As phenomenological research aiming to uncover the authentic student experience in some detail (Denscombe, 2003) data was collected through email interviews and the questions and probes were framed to centre on the positive aspects of their experiences of work and study. Appreciative inquiry is not unproblematic, for example the concentration on the positive side of experiences has led to accusations of idealism and a kind of 'feel good' research approach (Reed, 2007; Cousin, 2009). However, as researchers we have not attempted to blot out the negative elements in adopting this appreciative stance. Our view is that what matters most is that the research is planned and conducted with integrity and rigour. The aim is that the narratives constructed through this

approach will energise the debate and create a positive mindset when thinking about the relationship between work-related experiences and academic study.

The sample consisted of eleven full-time first, second and third year undergraduate Specialist degree and Joint Honours BA (Hons) Education Studies students. 97% of the student population on this course is female and 96% of students are studying the course full-time over three years. About 40% of students on the course across the three levels are over 24 years of age. The majority enter the course after studying 'A' levels at school or College. 18% of students studying at level 3 are students who join the course as a progression from Foundation degree study in order to complete a BA (Hons) degree award. The sample consisted of one male and ten females, four of whom were over 24 years of age. The BA (Hons) Education Studies degree course which they are all enrolled on is not a course leading to Qualified Teacher Status. It is not confined to education in schools but is concerned also with Education in a range of education settings and locations. The work-placement module allows time to be spent in one such setting where the work undertaken in the setting has an education or training dimension. Those wishing to go onto a career in teaching opt to continue to take a Postgraduate Certificate in Education. Others graduating from the course go on to a range of careers which have included education administration, further training to follow careers in social work, education guidance and counselling, youth work or librarianship. Some take posts as research assistants, learning mentors or classroom support assistants.

Data collection via email interview, like any method of data collection, has both advantages and disadvantages and these will now be considered. The email interviews were conducted using the University's student email accounts which provide a secure environment and a usual means of communication with which students are familiar. The nature and purpose of the research was explained to students in the initial email invitation to participate and informed consent obtained. It is recognised however that certain ethical issues arise from this.

Firstly, whilst care was taken to avoid any pressure or coaxing to participate, the request came from the researcher who was at the same time their tutor. It could be argued that the students may therefore have experienced some sense in which they felt that they 'ought' to participate. Secondly, it was not possible to guarantee anonymity and so the email responses from those electing to participate were made in the full knowledge that whilst confidentiality would be guaranteed, the nature of the on-going email dialogue with the researcher meant that the identity of the student was known to the researcher as they made their responses.

It must be recognised that this may have both influenced the decision to participate at all and for those that did, it may have constrained or altered the nature of their responses. The relationship between tutor and student has a power dimension to it and in terms of the research design and ownership, that too would inevitably be seen by participants as largely planned and owned by the researchers rather than themselves. This is an issue requiring further reflection by the researchers in terms of the design of a study aiming to develop our knowledge from the insider perspective of the student. The relationship between the tutor and students is a professional one but is not detached and distant. The tutor builds up a close personal knowledge of the students through weekly contact over the period of study. Implications for the design and conduct of the research are that this can be both a strength and potential issue. In terms of the former, the tutor researcher had developed insights and depth of knowledge of the students and their circumstances and experiences simply through regular contact and pastoral support. However, this could also be a disadvantage in a study seeking to offer a fair and trustworthy critical analysis of the student experience. James and Busher (2007) discussed some of the ethical issues and challenges raised when conducting online qualitative email interviewing research and their experience was a valuable source to draw on when new to using this on-line method of data collection. One concern was that the views represented would accurately reflect the participants' views and that knowing their identities

would not compromise this and our interpretation of the data would faithfully reproduce their intended meanings. The quotes chosen to include in the findings reported here have been selected by the researchers and inevitably there is a danger of bias in terms of those chosen and our judgements as to how these are representative of the views expressed. The next planned stage in developing the research will be to develop the methodological triangulation through the use of follow-up interviews to discuss in more depth the themes which we have identified from the data and it is intended that this will add further to the 'trustworthiness' of the research.

The email interview was found to have some particular advantages and many of these are identified by Bryman (2008) in his discussion of on-line interviews. For example, the students were able to construct their own on-line narratives through their email responses at times which were convenient to them and they could reflect on what they wanted to say before they pressed the 'send' key. By sending one question at a time, the narrative accounts were gradually constructed and developed through the use of follow-up probes and 'pick ups'. Due to factors such as respondents' work commitments, childcare responsibilities and access issues, the asynchronous email interview had certain benefits as it meant that the responses could be composed and sent at times most convenient to the respondents. The respondents seemed to like this method of data collection, and commented for example that:

> The email interview I found to be quite good because it can be done when I had a free moment, not as time consuming as if Id had to be at a certain place at a certain time, it also gave me time to think about my responses without having someone sat waiting. (Dee)

> and

> …found that email interviewing is a nice way of doing an interview. Means that the respondent can answer in their own time rather than having to organise a time to have a face to face meeting which might sometimes be difficult. (Diane)

For some respondents, the email exchanges were longer and more reflective whilst others were in the form of less extended narrative. However, respondents sometimes sent their own further follow-on thoughts to add to previous replies following a period of further reflection and these additional contributions tended to extend their first responses. Whilst there was no pressure to respond within a specified time, most chose to reply within a few days but some took longer. When these responses were received they were sometimes quite detailed and accompanied by apologies for the delay which was either due to the need to have sufficient thinking time before formulating a response or in some cases due to other unrelated pressures. It can be argued that this additional thinking time may have led to more in-depth and considered responses and richer and more finely woven narratives than might have been gained in a more 'traditional' face-to-face interview.

Bryman (2008) has considered issues raised by the use of online personal interviews in qualitative research and has noted that one advantage is that the online interview provides a typed interview transcript. When the interviews were completed, the transcripts were analysed for emerging themes. This was done carefully to avoid imposing predetermined themes and categories which the data could be then 'fitted into'. The process was time consuming but it was important to 'listen' carefully to the data in order to build up a picture of how the respondents made sense of their experiences and to uncover deeper layers of meaning. Memoing proved a useful tool to record immediate thoughts and ideas about themes that seemed to be emerging from the data (Kellet, 2005:100). Through reading and re-reading the transcripts the following themes emerged from the data and under which the findings are now reported. In order to safeguard respondent anonymity, pseudonyms are used.

Analysis of themes

A number of interesting themes arise from an analysis of the data, significant amongst these and appearing as a thread which ran through the students' responses, was the idea that experience of the workplace, whether through work placement experience or other part-time work, gave academic work more meaning and purpose. This and other themes extracted from the data will now be examined to uncover students' own explanations of aspects of the work-learning nexus. Inevitably, there is overlap between these themes as they are all inter-related.

Perceptions of how experience in the workplace and academic study articulate

For some respondents their employment motivated them to work harder on the degree course in order to eventually pursue a more interesting career. One factor which appeared important in this was being able to link learning on the course to the workplace. Sonya referred to this as 'reality testing theory', going on to explain her conviction that 'when you can apply your study skills to work situations it encourages you to want to learn more.' Debbie reflected that the modules had 'explained things' but it was the work placement module that allowed students 'to observe these different theories in use…' In this way the workplace setting had provided a real-life application and real meaning to what had previously been an academic understanding but without a feel for the issues involved in applying this in the unpredictability and complexities of real life situations. Debbie's experience for the work placement module was in a school for Deaf young people. She found this to be an 'invaluable' element of the course:

> I have found concepts that are being taught easier to engage with
> when I have a context to put them in.

From this experience she is now considering the education of Deaf people as a possible career choice and this has given her a renewed enthusiasm to study to achieve this end:

> … because I am working to a specific goal I am much more motivated to learn.

Like Debbie, Jennifer also took the view that planning opportunities into the course for students to learn in settings other than the lecture room can make learning more meaningful and motivating. In the case of Education Studies students, experience in an education-related setting can help them to see that what they are taught in class has some practical application:

> In terms of motivation towards finishing the course, by getting out of the seminar rooms and actually practising what you are being taught, that in itself is a motivator… when I returned to the seminars I was able to use this to complete something else on the course which I may have struggled with before due to the lack of motivation from myself.

For Jennifer, the course took on new meaning when she undertook the work placement module. It was study on this module which she said has 'left me with a feeling that what I was engaging with on the course is relevant and can be related back to the workplace'. Through her narrative we can see how policies and practices she had understood at an intellectual level became more deeply understood. She refers to it being when she could see what was taught in class transferred into practice that she really began to actively listen in class and engage more profoundly with the learning. The work placement experience:

> …helped me to not only understand but also influenced the way in which I listened in seminars and went about my own supported open learning outside of the seminar time… there is only so much theory one can do without getting bored of it. Sometimes to actually go out and see it or experience it is the best way to fully understand something.

Sandra's narrative shows her linking her experience and learning from work to developing as a self-critical student. There was evidence of critical insights into

employers' expectations of her as an employee being applied to thinking about herself as a student and what she expected of herself. She had thought critically about what her employer expected of her and through reflection on this had applied this thinking to help her to have a more self-critical approach to study:

> Through my experiences at work, I have also learnt that there are things that my employers expect of me, and therefore there are things that I expect of myself in terms of my studies.

This is an interesting part of Sandra's narrative and something that should be of particular importance to academic staff. The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ) (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2008) provides a reference point for academic standards. The descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 6: Bachelor's degree with honours, includes the expectation that holders of this qualification will have developed, amongst other outcomes and attributes, a capacity for critical evaluation and analysis. In this extract from Sandra's narrative, evidence can be seen of a critical analysis of her employers' expectations and of her applying this to thinking about and evaluating herself as a learner. This stems from her experience in part-time work which can be seen to have contributed to learning appropriate for level six.

An important part of experience of the workplace which Deidre had through study on the work placement module was the informal mentoring and guidance she received from the staff there. Her placement was in nursery and she learnt much from the discussions and advice received from the nursery management. This advice was of a practical nature, for example suggestions which helped her to plan and carry out her work placement tasks and to develop ideas which would form the basis of her dissertation study. She also benefitted from career advice from these colleagues and the contacts for possible employment she developed through them. Deidre reflected on how she regretted that she had never accessed the careers advice available to her at University because she had never managed to arrange this. However, she had found the support and

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practical advice from the setting when considering possible career options something she welcomed.

Sophie's narrative revealed that whilst studying on the course she had found there were very few instances where her experience in the world of work had been useful or relevant to the learning outcomes of the course. She felt that there had been no opportunities for her to put knowledge from her lectures to use at work or vice versa. However, on further reflection her email narratives showed evidence of her seeing some of the academic and study skills such as developing independence as a learner, time-keeping and organizational skills to have been transferable and useful. This leads us into consideration of the second theme identified from the data.

Skills and experiences

It is important to recognise that work can be a big part of students' lives. John for example talked about the importance of work to him whilst studying at university. He has had a few part-time jobs in retail and has worked at these throughout his three years of study. This reflected the situation of many of the other respondents who were attempting to work and undertake full-time study throughout all or most of their degree programme. What becomes notable from the narratives is that the students appear to invest a great deal of themselves in their work and can make connections between the transfer of workplace skills, academic study and developing a strong CV for better future career prospects. Rather than seeing work as no more than a source of income to pay for study, for some students work itself was recognised as having an important influence on study and was acknowledged too as having value for study, even when undertaken in a setting which had no direct link to Education. Deidre for example told how her work experience had helped her to become more organised and to know how to prioritise in order to meet coursework deadlines. Dee recognised that through study on the course she has developed skills and abilities that have proved

useful to her in her employment as events manager, a job which she is doing at the same time as studying:

> Studying on my course has helped me develop a number of different skills. Firstly communication skills… through class discussions, debates and being a seminar leader I have developed my ability to talk to anyone critically analysing what I am saying as well as what others are saying. This ability to think critically has been able to be transferred to my current job as I deal with members of the public and management. This confidence given to me by the… lectures and seminars has greatly improved my ability to talk to and question people…

Most respondents identified time management, self-direction and independence as learners, information searching, critical thinking, organisational and interpersonal skills as important skills developed on the course and which would be useful and transferable to any future employment. Some also saw how the development of skills in the workplace transferred over to study too.

For John, the workplace offered a form of 'escape from some of the pressures of university'. There was a sense in John's narrative of a strong personal investment in the job he had at the retail store:

> Having this job has been important in shaping me as a person… it has also boosted my confidence and possibly made me become more mature.

Rachel's narrative also testified to the development of a new perspective on life as a result of new learning and what she describes as 'the change in me' brought about by university education, has changed her quite profoundly:

> I have caught this bug people get when they start learning and the world is very different every time I learn something new.

Sonya is combining full-time study with managing a Children's Centre and study on the course had influenced her practice and that of her colleagues in some important ways. She has begun to 'question deeply what I thought I knew, learnt

or understood' and in that sense the course had been somewhat unsteadying by knocking off-balance previous beliefs and views. Not only does she feel more informed and more critical of new information and policy directives coming into the Centre, she has a 'more professional sense of self'. By this she referred to how she had grown in confidence as a professional and how she was perceived by colleagues:

> Working with other colleagues that I liaise with e.g. schools, early years consultants, Ed Psychs etc I have noticed a change in how they relate to me and I have been more confident about contributing ideas and opinions.

Sonya expressed the view that having a permanent role in a work setting gives learning on the course meaning and purpose and has helped to strengthen what she refers to as professional identity and a sense that her views are seen as more informed, valued and credible by other professionals for example when collaborating with the local primary school, Early Years Partnership and colleagues.

Confidence and personal development

Deidre reflects on how she has experienced personal growth through study on the course. She reports in her narrative that she has developed into a deeper thinker, she is more questioning and tries to see different points of view before forming a judgement. Her work before becoming a student had been in customer service and the skills and personal qualities she has developed from this have been applicable to her course studies:

> My experience in the workplace has influenced my course by making me focus on the needs of others. … I feel the workplace experience has made me appear very approachable and helpful and I feel I have been able to apply this across my course, both in my interaction with other students for group work and general interaction. Workplace experience has also influenced what I have wanted to learn and study…

Deidre feels that her work related experience has helped her to be confident when doing presentations or leading seminar discussions with her peers on the course. Her work experience and wider life experience outside the course have made her 'be more focused in what I want from the course as personal fulfilment'. She explains that this wider experience of the real world of work and life has made her more appreciative of the opportunity to study as a student in higher education and to gain a degree, which she said she hoped would improve her lifestyle.

For Sonya it was the personal enjoyment of the experience of learning that stimulated her interest and sustained her throughout her studies. It could be that this enjoyment of learning and enquiry, which she highlighted as an aspect of her engagement with the undergraduate course, will encourage her to view professional learning positively as an important part of future employment and career progression. Similarly, Rachel has gone through the course with her appetite for learning growing insatiably. Her narrative tells how she relished the opportunity to learn and immersed herself in it, always having the maximum number of library books out on loan "I could not get enough of it". Again like Sonya, this positive attitude to learning is something that Rachel takes with her at the end of her course and may transfer very positively into future learning for continued professional development for employment and career progression throughout her working life.

Sandra reflected on how the responsibility she is given at work has given her more self-confidence. This, she felt had been transferable to her studies in enabling her to feel more confident in talking to other students, which is an important part of learning, for example when participating in group work. This confidence developed from dealing with customers in the shop and the restaurant where she works:

…I enjoy communicating with the customers who come into the shop and do what I can to help them find what they are looking for. I feel this job has also helped me with my self-confidence in talking to people who I wouldn't normally as it is within my job requirements to approach customers who enter the shop.

When customers at the restaurant commented on her 'friendly attitude and hard work' she comments that 'This made me feel valued' and boosted her positive feelings about herself and her self- confidence. She comments that her work experiences '… give me confidence in myself that I can follow through with my career plans'.

Discussion and conclusions

These narrative accounts have provided explanations of some of the links students see between work and work-related experience on the one hand and their undergraduate studies on the other. A number of themes became apparent from these accounts and what seems particularly noticeable is how this dynamic between the two operates. This study therefore points to the importance of tutors recognising this synergy. Students are often forced to work during term time from financial necessity (Curtis, 2005), they may have debts to pay (Curtis and Klapper, 2005) and living expenses which still have to be met whilst studying (Manthei and Gilmore, 2005). Some have families to support at the same time as coping with the costs of study. For some students therefore, working whilst studying is an inevitability and a need. By taking an appreciative view of this, the study has not sought to deny the stresses and hardships which students can experience when trying to study at undergraduate level and work at the same time. What it has aimed to do is to recognise that a deficit discourse around notions of employment and study may exacerbate the stresses which some students experience between these two 'worlds' they are attempting to harmonise. In this study it has been argued that this can sap both energy and the 'will to learn'.

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What has come through the narratives is the number of ways in which experience of work and academic study inter-connect. This link can be clearer and more obvious for Education Studies undergraduates when the workplace is a setting with an education or training dimension but even where the workplace had no or limited obvious relevance to learning on the course, students identified clear benefits. In the case of the former, students were able to 'reality test' the academic learning and theoretical knowledge from the course in applying it to a practice setting. This gave academic study a context, giving it more meaning and an obvious application. It promoted a deeper understanding of the learning on the course, as can be seen from their accounts. In the case of the latter, students identified that the transfer of learning nonetheless occurs in more generic ways. For example this can be seen in Sandra's account of her experience as an employee, an account which provides evidence of the transfer of this experience to influence her development as a more self-critical learner. Infact whatever the workplace context they had experienced, whether course-related or not, students were able to identify how the course had helped them to develop transferable and useful skills which would have relevance for future career employment, and also how their experience in the workplace setting had invested learning on the course with more meaning and purpose. The skills typically identified were organisational, time management, self-management, interpersonal, communication, research and the skills of critical thinking.

Their experience in the workplace had important benefits for their studies and a reoccurring idea which flowed through much of the data was the notion of the very personal and close ways in which the respondents had been influenced by their work and their study. Both appear to have exerted a deep impression on a number of the respondents and their views of themselves. John for example felt that his job in the retail store had 'been important in shaping me as a person…' and Rachel felt that through the new learning gained from her studies on the course, she had come to see the world very differently. Others, as seen for example in Sonya's account, found study on the course somewhat destabilising

in terms of causing them to question their previous assumptions and beliefs. In some cases, the narratives provide evidence of the experience of the workplace having a positive influence on study and engagement with the course. This came through for example in the accounts of Deidre and Sandra who both attributed the self-confidence that they had developed from their respective experiences of working in customer service and in retail and catering. The interpersonal skills such as confidence to relate well to others which they had developed through their experiences at work had enabled them to interact well with other students and so to contribute more to group work tasks as part of their learning on the course. The confidence gained from the skills and personal qualities developed in the workplace allowed Deidre to make more confident presentations which are part of the assessment on the course, and also to be comfortable leading seminar discussions in class.

The dynamic can be seen in these accounts to work both ways between work and study and study and work. As explained previously, the experience of work appeared to give context and meaning to study for some students, especially where they were able to apply theoretical knowledge to a practical setting. This resonates with the concept of the engaged student which was discussed above and which we linked to the value placed on the knowledge from their wider experiences of work and life which students bring with them to the course.

As explained at the outset, this small-scale research study was motivated by a desire to gain a more informed understanding from the students' perspectives of how their varied experiences of work in a number of different forms, including course-related and non-course-related, paid and voluntary, articulate with their study. One of the key aims was to better appreciate the mutual benefits so that this can not only inform future course planning and design but also foster deeper understanding of what students see as the connections between their experiences of work and their engagement with study.

In terms of 'generalizability', defined by Wellington (2000:197) as the extent to which the findings from research in one context can be applied to other contexts or settings, it is recognised that the findings from this limited research study are not intended to be generalised. However, they may be considered to have implications for others working in similar areas (Opie, 2004:5) for example in schools and colleges. Opie draws on the distinction made by Bassey (1984) between 'open' and 'closed' generalisations:

> Bassey draws a distinction between 'open' generalisations where 'there is confidence that it can be extrapolated beyond the observed results of the sets or events studied, to similar events' and 'closed' generalisations 'which refers to a specific set of events and without extrapolation to similar events' (1984:111). He goes on to link the latter term with the 'relatability' (1984:118) of a piece of educational research, that is how it can be related with what is happening in another classroom. (Opie, 2004:5)

One of the important benefits of this study may be that others will identify elements which they can relate to in their own situations, in other words its 'relatability' rather than its 'generalisability'. 'Relatable' or 'recognisable' aspects may be in relation to motivation, employability and what students find valuable and engaging. It is hoped that this study has also demonstrated the value of gaining the 'insider' perspective from the students' own experience in order to understand their experience of the social world and to hear their voices through their narrative accounts. Practitioners in other settings and phases of education may recognise how experience in the workplace can give added meaning for students to what they learn in the classroom, which as one respondent suggested 'encourages you to want to learn more'. Colleagues in other settings may also recognise the motivation which the students in this study described in terms of their more active listening and engagement in class. In terms of contributing to the development of self-motivated and independent learners, the experience of the workplace setting appears to motivate students to expect more of themselves through knowing what others expect of them at work. Sandra's account for example showed how this had transferred over to help to develop her as a self-critical learner. Confidence to be more active as a learner and to take

more leadership responsibility in group learning activities on the course was attributed by some respondents to the self-confidence they had developed at work. On the basis of this limited evidence it is suggested that by recognising and appreciating these synergies and mutual benefits, tutors can help students to experience greater harmony between these two aspects of their lives and to maximise the benefits.

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