

**Authors: Kerry Holman and Dr Tanya Richardson**

Kerry Holman MA, BA (Hons), EYPS

*School of Childhood and Education Sciences, Canterbury Christ Church University,  
Canterbury, England.*

Lecturer Early Childhood Education and Care

Canterbury Christ Church University

Medway Campus  
Rowan Williams Court  
30 Pembroke Court  
Chatham Maritime  
Kent  
ME4 4UF

**Tel:** 01227 924459

Email: [kerry.holman@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:kerry.holman@canterbury.ac.uk)

Dr Tanya Richardson PhD, MA (Ed.), BA (Hons.), EYPS, FHEA

*Faculty of Education and Humanities, University of Northampton, Northampton, England.*

Programme Leader for Early Childhood Studies

Senior Lecturer in Early Years

Faculty of Health, Education and Society

University of Northampton

University Drive

Northampton

NN1 5PH

Tel: 01604 892485

Email: [tanya.richardson@northampton.ac.uk](mailto:tanya.richardson@northampton.ac.uk)

Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3050-3720>

Twitter: @TanWillDoIt

There was no funding for this paper.

**Perceptions of placement experiences of Early Childhood Studies students: the fluency of knowledge and skills.**

**Kerry Holman and Dr Tanya Richardson**

**Abstract**

This paper discusses how academic support prepares undergraduate students for their workplace experience, involving cohorts of students from two universities in England, who offer an undergraduate level, three-year, Early Childhood Studies (ECS) degree. By adopting an interpretive approach, questionnaires were administered to the students concerned (n=65), to seek their views and opinions on the placement experience. These were administered prior to them attending their first placement and then again on their return. The study found that students were more prepared than they originally perceived themselves to be when undertaking placement, and that a lack of confidence derived from fearing the unknown. The findings indicated that tutor and peer support were most valued as preparation tools and it is suggested that this support is a major factor in the confidence levels of students. This paper argues that the explicit knowledge gained from studying a degree course, and the tacit knowledge and skills that are gained through placement should be viewed as a combined approach rather than two separate entities which should, in turn, aid in confidence building. This is of significance both nationally, and internationally for those who may be considering including a workplace experience within their programme.

**Key Words:** placement, higher education, Early Childhood Studies, England, workplace learning, tacit and explicit knowledge

## **Introduction**

For the purposes of this paper, the terms work-based placement or placement experience will be used interchangeably and is defined as the opportunity to work, unpaid, within an Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) environment, as part of the degree course on which the students are enrolled. Although workplace experience, or placement experience, is an integral aspect of many Early Childhood Studies degrees throughout England (Nutbrown, 2012), there is no uniform approach to the preparation that students receive for this.

The rationale of including placement experience within an academic course is that it provides cohesion to that which is taught in the academic classroom and that which occurs in practice. Eraut (2007, p.404) argues that:

While education and practice settings each have both theories and practices, they both have very different cultures and very different discourses...people who work in both contexts have to be bilingual, but this does not mean that they become good interpreters. Knowledge of how to use formal knowledge from higher education settings in practice contexts has a very strong tacit dimension; and this affects how it can be learned.

(Eraut, 2007, p.404)

It is these different cultures that this paper sets out to establish; how does the preparation for this workplace experience provide the students with this skill in 'bilingualism' (Eraut, 2007, p.404), that is the joining up of theory to practice, and allow the students to interpret what they see whilst out on placement, giving that fluency between the tacit and explicit knowledge. The argument is made that if students are not adequately prepared for the experience then this learning cannot occur, and the benefits of the experience will then be reduced.

## **Aims and objectives**

This study aimed to develop knowledge around how academic support prepares students for placement experience. The study objectives were to:

- examine student's perceptions on their readiness for placement
- compare the two institutional approaches to placement preparation
- evaluate which elements of the approach are perceived by students to be most worthwhile
- make recommendations to plan future learning and teaching strategies.

This paper will argue, through reference to a multiple case study small scale research project, that adequate preparation is essential in order to boost student's confidence and ensure that they are then able to learn and become 'bilingual' (Eraut, 2007, p.404) both in their practice and in their interpretation of what they witness in practice, through the connection of what they have learnt in the lecture room.

### ***The context of placement experiences in undergraduate programmes***

Historically, much research has been conducted in order to understand the benefits to students of work placement experiences. Brooks and Youngson (2014) state that demonstrating the impact of work placements during study in higher education is an important factor in supporting participation rates, as it has been highlighted that the numbers of students taking work placements in higher education is falling. Some students are choosing to undertake placement experience in order to support their abilities to enter the workforce earlier, given the current economic context in which they are situated (Bullock *et al*, 2009). Dearing (2007) argues that 'forging the links' between theory and practical elements are important in supporting students' understanding of their subject. However, such research has tended to focus on more vocational subjects such as business, health or engineering (Thompson, 2016). Additionally, research tends to focus on placements such as 'sandwich courses' and placement experiences of some length. Sandwich courses involve up to 12 months on placement in the desired industry (Brooks and Youngson, 2014). However, shorter placements can also be a positive learning experience for students (Knight and Yorke, 2004). Research by Dey, Lindsay and Thomson (2017)

concluded that students who completed a short placement (eight afternoons) within the early years found the experience useful in developing skills. Related to this, the placement experiences from both universities in this study are deemed 'short' placements.

### ***Placements in the Early Childhood Sector***

The Nutbrown Review of Qualifications (2012) highlighted the importance of placement experiences, citing them as an essential part of training for early years practitioners within England. Additionally, Reid (2016) recognises that placement opportunities are a long-standing feature of vocational university education programmes, including Childhood Studies programmes. Placement experience in the sector at an undergraduate level is often associated with trainee teachers and as such, there is a sound research base related to primary and secondary teaching placements (Rouse, Morrissey and Rahimi, 2012; Macy, Squires and Barton, 2009; Moody, 2009) that eventually lead to Qualified Teacher Status. However, there is significantly less literature surrounding placements in the field of Early Childhood Studies. Moreover, with McMillian (2009) also arguing that the combination of theory and practice is an essential feature of early years professionalism, it is asserted that the value of placement experience in the early years context must be explored.

### ***Strengthening knowledge?***

Jackson (2015) argues that work integrated learning is based on the theories of active (Bonwell and Eison, 1991) and experimental learning (Kolb, 1984; Jackson, 2015), allowing students to practice what they learn. Theoretical learning in university aims to provide students with the explicit knowledge they need to succeed in their field. However, practical experience provides the opportunity to learn aspects of the profession which may not be learnt in the university environment (Rouse, Morrissey and Rahimi, 2012); Ehiyazaryan and Barraclough (2009) believe that skills are developed more effectively in a workplace than in a university classroom. However, Criticos (1993; cited in Walmsley, Thomas and Jameson, 2006) suggests that experience alone is 'insufficient to produce

learning' (Walmsley *et al.*, 2006, p. 367), although when combined with academic study the workplace learning is enhanced (Bourner and Ellerker, 1998).

McFarland, Saunders and Allen (2008) recognised that students completing a Human Development undergraduate degree felt that practical experience allowed them to practice skills they had learnt about in lectures and this was of the highest significance for them. In contrast, Thompson (2016) argues that students preferred a more traditional delivery of content in the form of lectures and seminars. This is further reinforced by Pegg *et al.* (2012, p.32) who acknowledge that 'lecture-based teaching methods are still important in developing theoretical and abstract conceptual knowledge'. Price *et al.* (2011) researched students' views on the role of their lecturer during a nursing degree, concluding that students felt academic support for assignments was the most important part of the role. That said, studies have found that students are keen to receive a greater amount of preparation for placement and the associated assessments, as they view this as an essential aspect of their degree programme (Musgrave and Stobbs, 2015; Moloney, 2017).

All things considered, it can be concluded that students who take part in a placement experience alongside academic study therefore have the opportunity to maximise their learning (Neill and Mulholland, 2003).

### ***Employability and skills***

Cottrell (2015, p. 250) describes employability as being 'a concurrence of capability, preparedness for employment and the relevance of these to the current job market', whilst Jackson and Wilton (2016) highlight the growing importance of developing employable graduates in an ever-competitive economic market. Pegg *et al.* (2012) explore several definitions of employability and recognise the wide variability in institutional and national contexts when considering what this looks like. Internationally, the picture seems similar. For example, a Canadian study conducted by Finch *et al.* (2013) concluded that employers are most interested in five key employability attributes: soft skills (for example communication and interpersonal skills), problem-solving skills (such as critical

thinking), pre-graduate experience (such as placements and work experience), some functional skills (for example specific knowledge) and academic reputation (degree classification and reputation of institution).

A work placement experience allows students to develop and enhance key employability skills such as communication, problem-solving in a workplace, and self-management (Bridges, 1993). More recently, Harris -Reeves and Mahoney (2017) suggest that work-based learning ‘contribute[s] to the development of employability skills to prepare students for the workplace through applying knowledge and skills in real-world settings’ (p. 33). This suggestion from Australasia supports previous ideas that it is a blend of traditional learning methods and practical experience which supports the employability of students. It has been argued by Knight and Yorke (2004) that even a short placement experience can contribute positively to a student’s skills set and their employability.

Studies have shown confidence can be developed through a placement experience, one example being the research published by Dey, Lindsay and Thomson (2017). Confidence is just one key attribute which a worthwhile placement experience can support, supporting a student’s ability to demonstrate a number of generic skills (Te Wiata, 2001; cited in Crebert *et al.*, 2004). This is reinforced by Thompson (2016) who concluded that confidence was interwoven with other themes through placement include the gaining of knowledge and experience, relationship building and understanding. In addition to the attributes listed previously, Harvey *et al.* (1997) argue that employers desire for graduates to be transformative individuals who can initiate and respond to change and be critical thinkers who are adaptable and adaptive. Though dated, it must be acknowledged that these attributes are more important than ever given the current economic climate internationally, reinforcing Pegg *et al.*’s (2012) recognition of context.

All of this literature reinforces the need for Early Years degrees to ensure the two elements are fostered, both knowledge and practice, in order to enhance future employability and the confidence of the workforce. It is therefore argued that these two elements are those which need to be considered as essential for engagement within a placement experience. Both the explicit and the tacit knowledge is

therefore essential, with the explicit knowledge coming from the classroom and the tacit coming from the placement. With these key concepts considered, it is important to understand the context in which this small-scale research study was situated.

## Context

*Work based and placement learning have become increasingly important elements of many higher education institutions' activities. They involve particular forms of collaboration and can involve a variety of arrangements. (Quality Assurance Agency, 2007, p.5)*

This study was undertaken at two English universities who deliver the undergraduate level Early Childhood Studies (ECS) degree; a three-year course for those wishing to work with children aged 0 – 8. These universities were situated in different parts of the country, one in the South (University A) and one in the East Midlands (University B). Students who attend these courses attend placement within an early-years setting (working with children 0-8 and/or families) and are prepared for placement within specific modules which are designed for this. The modules are also designed to enhance their personal, academic and professional development. Although both universities have different approaches to the modules, they were used purposely for this study to provide two different methods of delivering placement and to provide a contrast in approach with the view to considering opposing systems and the perceptions of such systems.

The module details from both universities are shown in the following table:

	University A	University B
<b>Is placement compulsory?</b>	No	Yes
<b>At what level of studies is placement offered?</b>	Level 5 & 6	Level 4, 5 & 6

<b>How many days have to be attended?</b>	10 days at level 5  10 days at level 6	20 days at level 4 and 5 (at level 5, 5 days of the placement are offered in Sweden)  10 days at level 6
<b>Teaching hours before placement</b>	20 hours at level 5  10 hours at level 6  <i>Plus independent study for both</i>	32 hours at all levels
<b>Support before placement</b>	Lectures  Seminars  Workshops  Module handbook  Online information	Lectures  Online information  Mentor support  Handbook
<b>Teaching hours after placement</b>	0 teaching hours  NB. an optional day for reflection is offered	8 hours
<b>Number of credits associated with the related modules</b>	20 credits at both levels	40 credits at all levels
<b>Support whilst students are on placement</b>	Online discussion boards	One hour visit from tutor.  Online blog for FAQ and answers

Settings used for placement by both these institutions are accustomed to hosting ECS students. The settings themselves provide a mentor for the students and all will have been invited to attend training on what is required to support the students. All settings are required to have been rated good or

outstanding by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), the organisation who have the responsibility of assessing and reporting on the quality of settings in England.

## **Methodology**

This multiple exploratory case study was carried out within a qualitative paradigm, with the intention of finding out student's views on a certain topic. Denscombe (2014) states that an exploratory case study explores the key issues that impact upon participants and this was the intention. An interpretive paradigm was the approach as the intention was to analyse views and opinions. Yin (2014:220) defines interpretivism as 'presenting ..... participant's multiple perspectives and meanings'. Interpreting the perspectives of students from the two institutions occurred in the way as described below.

Participants completed two online questionnaires anonymously, one considering how they felt just before their placement experience began, and one reflecting after the placement. Both questionnaires had a selection of open and closed ended questions, allowing for a mix of quantitative and qualitative data to be collected. Although the questionnaires included statistical elements the study was still deemed to be within the qualitative vein as the overall aim was to interpret the views and opinions that these statistics represented. These questionnaires were distributed through an online survey website to ensure that the responses were kept anonymous and confidential. It was noted that there may be concerns, ethically, with the perception of power in this study. This will be discussed in time. The questionnaires were introduced to the students by their lecturers who were responsible for the module.

Although participants cannot be coerced into completing a questionnaire (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007), it was important that students were not made to feel that their completion of these surveys, or the answers that they gave, had any bearing on their success at placement or within the module. This was the main reason for a questionnaire being the method of choice. Although valuable data can be obtained (Denscombe, 2014), focus groups and interviews were disregarded as a possible option as they may have caused discomfort for the participants, therefore may not have produced reliable findings.

The responses collected from both universities were then analysed in a number of ways. Firstly, significant findings were thematically analysed as a whole, to look collectively at student's feelings about academic support and placement experiences in higher education. Secondly, findings were viewed comparatively between responses from each university, looking for significant variations in responses from each of the universities and considering the reasons for this (perhaps module layout, content, contact time). Additionally, responses were compared to ascertain feelings around confidence and preparation prior to the placements, with feelings following the placements, and to establish how students felt they progressed.

### ***Sample***

Purposive sampling (Denscombe, 2014) was undertaken throughout this research. All ECS students at both universities, who were being prepared to go out on placement for the first time and who were taking these relevant modules, were invited to take part in the research study. Of the 111 students across both cohorts, 39 responded to questionnaire 1 and 26 responded to questionnaire 2, giving a 36% and 23% representation of the cohort respectively.

### ***Ethical considerations***

As mentioned previously, all questionnaires were completed in a confidential fashion and results were anonymous. Questions were worded as such that it was not possible to identify participants from their responses. A consent form was devised and was completed prior to the completion of the questionnaire which set out all of the considerations and ensured that ethical guidelines (BERA, 2018; EECERA, 2015) were adhered to. Participants were given access to the findings of the study once completed.

### ***Triangulation***

Robson (2002) recognises that triangulation through literature is an acceptable method and due to the ethical considerations of how students were consulted (see above) this was deemed appropriate in this study. Denzin (1988) also alleges that observer triangulation; more than one observer being involved

in the study is a useful tool. It could be argued that as this study was undertaken by two researchers from different institutions, that this gave the element of observer triangulation.

## Findings

### *Prior to placement*

All respondents attending either University A (n=27) or University B (n=12) reported having had prior experience within the field before their placement experience. This came in a range of forms with the majority (59%) having attended placement whilst at school/college, some having undertaken paid work within the sector (22%) and some having been involved in volunteering (48%), highlighting that some had more than one kind of experience. Despite this breadth of experience, students reported a number of fears considered significant before their placement began. Fig.1 below shows the range of these fears.

Fig 1: Student's fears prior to placement.

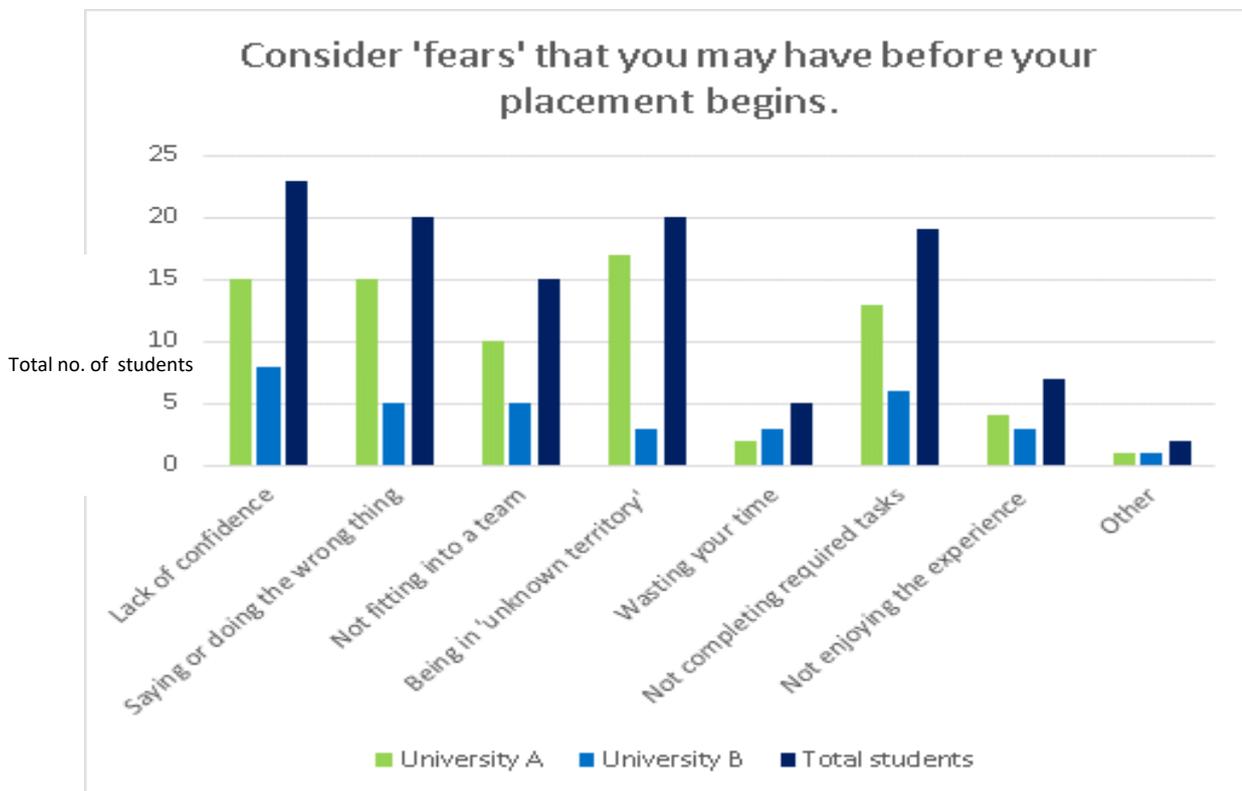


Fig. 1 above indicates that students had a range of things that concerned them prior to their placement commencing, with 62% of students (n = 23) feeling that they lacked confidence. 54% (n=20) were anxious about saying or doing the wrong thing and being in unknown territory. These figures indicate that a range of concerns were present, mainly related to the issue of confidence and the students' confidence in their abilities to adapt to new situations and environments.

Students were also asked to report on what aspects of academic support that they had received, and which they deemed as particularly helpful. Thematic analysis on these qualitative responses allowed four key themes to be extracted, seen in fig. 2 below.

Fig 2: What academic support was useful to students prior to placement.

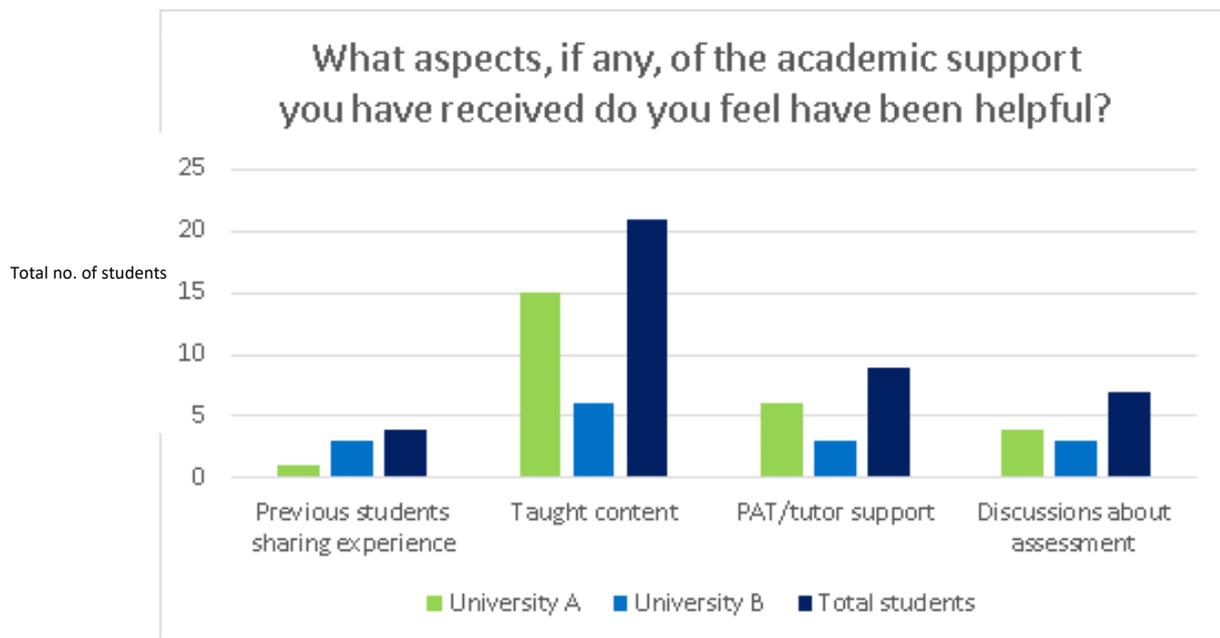


Fig. 2 above indicates that students, prior to go on placement, found the taught content most helpful overall, with 58% (n=21) feeling that the taught sessions were most useful. There was a notable difference however in the responses from the individual institutions, with University A students finding the taught content significantly more useful, but University B valuing all aspects of support fairly consistently.

Students described aspects of the support that they found useful, such as:

*“When other students who have been on placement and completed their portfolios talk about their experience giving tips and showing examples of how they structured their work”.*

*(participant from University B)*

*“The content regarding how we might undertake a certain situation during placement has been really helpful. A lot of the lectures have been based around making links between practice and our assignment which has been so helpful”.* *(participant from University B)*

Comments such as these emphasise that students are placing importance on assignment related support and this is an aspect they feel to be particularly useful.

### ***After placement***

As previously described, students were invited to complete a follow up questionnaire following their placement experience. The basis of this questionnaire was reflection on the experience, and the academic support that they had received. Respondents were first asked about how prepared they felt they were, on reflection. Prior to the placement, 39% of University A respondents felt slightly or not prepared. This figure had fallen to 20% post placement, suggesting that respondents from University A were more prepared than they initially believed. There was a slight drop in the percentage of respondents from University B who felt they were extremely prepared.

When considering how confident they felt about attending a further placement, it was clear that for respondents across both universities, confidence had grown. One student from University A stated:

*“I really enjoyed the placement but it was a relief when it ended. I felt my confidence increased a lot towards the end”*

With another participant from University A adding:

*“I felt confident on my professional role as a future practitioner, as I was able to adapt upon many skills and my professional identity”*

Students were asked to reflect on which aspects of academic support were most helpful prior to their placement experience, now with hindsight. Responses here echoed thoughts before placements took place, with tutor support and lecture and seminar content the most popular responses. Some respondents also valued the sharing of knowledge and experience from previous students. Many referred to lecture and seminar content being useful holistically, however, there were some responses which demonstrated a level of reflection about particular knowledge upon the experience, with one University A student reporting that:

*“The safeguarding information was important for preparing for placement however I do not feel that you can be particularly prepared for placement. You have to experience it”*

This indicates that students value a range of preparation approaches and that there is no one uniform approach, instead a variety of approaches were seen as beneficial with a view to giving the opportunity for reflection and self-direction.

When asked what additional support they would find useful, 44% (n=8) of respondents stated that they did not feel they needed anything further, indicating that they were content with the levels of support provided. The remaining 56% (n=10) who responded to this question gave a variety of suggestions on how improvements could be made with more lectures (n=4), more support with the assignment (n=2), and more organisational support (n=4) being the points proposed. This highlights the requirement for more guidance from lecturers rather than peers, who were considered useful in earlier responses.

Finally, students were asked to consider how they felt when their placement experience had ended. Thematic analysis of responses from both Universities revealed 33% of University A respondents and 8% of University B respondents felt that they had been able to consolidate knowledge and gain valuable experience, with one student from University B saying *“I felt like I had learnt a lot and managed to put theory that I had learnt in lectures into practice”*. Feelings of sadness or reluctance to leave the setting were common, with 60% of University A respondents and 66% of University B respondents feeling this. However, for some students, these feelings of sadness at leaving were

supported with statements such as feeling “*pleased as I got a job after it! It was an amazing experience and I'm glad I get to go back*”. All responses were positive in nature and highlighted that placement was an enjoyable and valuable aspect of the degree course. Students saw the benefits of this experience and, on reflection, felt it to be worthwhile for both learning and skill enhancement.

## **Discussion**

The confidence that students felt was explored prior to placement, and after it had concluded. Te Wiata (2001) argues that confidence supports students to demonstrate more generic skills within the workplace. Interestingly, the main barriers that participants reported that meant they did not feel confident prior to placement were reasons such as fear of the unknown and saying and doing the wrong thing. Anxiety on entering a new placement experience is a familiar emotion (Beck, 1992), even for the most experienced practitioner.

It is widely understood that practical experience allows students to learn aspects of professions which cannot be learnt in the university environment (Rouse, Morrissey and Rahimi, 2012), those same aspects that students reported as barriers to their confidence levels. This therefore provides evidence for the argument of the value of placement opportunities within a degree course, reinforcing the ideas of McMillian (2009) who argues that combining theory and practice is essential within early years professionalism. Student responses in this research study parallel those found by McFarland *et al.* (2008), citing that practical experience in the field allows students to consolidate their knowledge, by seeing and experiencing it first-hand.

Both cohorts felt the need for more preparation around assignments and this was a factor that was a cause for concern for both groups. This was also a recurring factor on their return from placement, significant perhaps when self-management is a key skill which Bridges (1993) argues is developed throughout a placement experience. The participants from University B appeared to feel relief at the completion of their placement due to the fact their assignment was a large task that needed undertaking. This stress impacts on the experience for the students and is a concern to them before,

during and after the placement. Interestingly, preliminary research by Dey, Lindsay and Thomson (2017) found that students who completed placement experience without summative assessment attached did not feel this pressure, instead embracing the opportunity to develop skills before a placement with assessment. Within University B, there are 40 credits associated to this module, which may account for why this cohort felt more strongly than University A (where there are only 20 credits associated to the module). In both cases, there is no space to arrange a pre-assessment placement such as that mentioned above. However, students are required to attend an 'induction interview' where they have the opportunity to visit the setting, and meet staff and discuss expectations from all avenues, which may go some way to reducing the pressure felt by students.

When reflecting after the placement experience, both cohorts reported that they were actually better prepared than they originally perceived. Again, this can be linked back to the idea of building confidence amongst students. Having confidence can support the abilities to demonstrate knowledge within assessments; whilst also supporting the development of professional relationships during the placement experience (Thompson, 2016). Findings showed that building relationships were important to the students.

When considering the research by Finch *et al.* (2013), which stated employers are looking for soft skills, problem-solving skills, pre-graduate experience, some functional skills and academic reputation, it can be noted that the majority of these skills are those which can be gained in a work-based placement. It is argued that for these skills to fully flourish that students need the confidence in order to allow this to occur. This is an area that requires further consideration.

The students reported feeling sad that placement was complete due to the fact that they would miss the children and practitioners that they had formed relationships with. This, alongside the fact that some of the most helpful aspects of the preparation for placement came from peer mentors, personal tutors and lecturers, shows the importance that students place on relationships, reinforcing findings from Price *et al.* (2011). It can be argued, based on this small-scale research study, that these relationships are what help to develop the confidence and the aspects that, as discussed above, cannot

be taught in an academic context. Reid (2016) has asserted that the relationship between tutors and students has been de-professionalised with a focus on accountability and social efficiency of late, and although in this research, findings indicate the value of this relationship, both institutions are careful to maintain the appropriate levels of professionalism related to this.

### ***Implications for future teaching and learning strategies***

From this small-scale research project, both Higher Education (HE) institutions have identified areas for development in terms of learning and teaching strategies to support their first-time placement students. With the Teaching Excellence Framework (HEFCE, 2017) in operation, and recognising excellence in teaching and learning at HE institutions, it is more important than ever that institutions are rigorously evaluating and improving provision for students.

Both institutions engaged in individual analysis in order to highlight key areas for development in teaching and learning strategies used. For University A, the priority has been to create ‘case studies’ which highlight both student and setting perceptions of the placement experience. These case studies explore professionalism, employability and key skills which were identified by students within the research, and will be used as a tool of reflection for future students studying on the module. The case studies are also taking an element of student support which was reported as useful by students at the other university in the study, thus sharing worthwhile practice. Initial feedback regarding these case studies has been received, with prospective students choosing to engage with this to support their own confidence. University B is opting to further develop strategies already in place, namely student mentor support and the use of video tutorials. Learning from more experienced peers was recognised as a valuable support, and as an accessible resource with little cost, is an effective one to continue to develop. University B has also reduced the credit value of the placement to reduce the pressure that the assignment appears to generate.

Although the literature review of this paper presented the case for the explicit knowledge to be generated within the classroom environment and the tacit knowledge being generated from the

placement, it is argued that, as a result of this study, that this should be taken one step further. What is argued is that this tacit and explicit knowledge should converge, with the university environment becoming more explicitly responsible for the skills element and including these “skills sessions” within the placement preparation schedule. If the institutions support the knowledge gained with the skills sessions then, it is argued, that this will result in students having more confidence in their abilities before the commencement of placement experience. This should then result in a much more positive experience from both the student’s and the setting’s perspective.

### ***Limitations of the study***

It is obviously not possible to generalise the findings from this study due to the small scale of the research (Yin, 2014), however the results can be used to aid reflection on a wider scale. A point worth noting is that the students from each university were at different levels of their studies.

University A students were in their second year of study, compared to University B being in their first year of study. It could be argued therefore that these students were not comparable as they were at different levels academically. However, both groups of students were experiencing an undergraduate placement experience for the first time and this is what was essential for the nature of this study, as it is the effectiveness of teaching and learning, and placement preparation which was explored.

Another limitation of this study is that it is not possible to identify if the same students completed both questionnaires. It may be that a different set of students answered the first questionnaire to those who completed the second set and fewer students responded to the second questionnaire. It is likely that the number of responses to questionnaire 2 were lower due to the timing of the questionnaire release and this is something to consider should a similar study be undertaken in the future. It is hoped that the students who did respond are representative of the whole group and, although generalisations cannot be made to the wider academic world, it is assumed that these responses can be used for a generalisation in the case study settings. In any instance, we can be sure that all students from each institution who responded have experienced identical academic support, and this may go some way to overcoming this limitation.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, this small-scale research paper has studied two cohorts of undergraduate Early Childhood Studies students from two universities who have differing ways of delivering workplace experience modules. Whilst both universities recognise the importance of ensuring students are adequately prepared, they prepare students in different ways.

Students were invited to answer questionnaires, considering their confidence levels and how prepared they felt prior to starting their placement. The same cohort of students were then invited to take part in a questionnaire afterwards, reflecting on their feelings upon their return. We found that students were more prepared than they initially felt they were, and that a lack of confidence they felt prior to placement derived from a fear of the unknown. Analysis of our findings also indicated that tutor support and peer support were the most valuable preparation tools, thus contributing to their confidence levels. As a result of these findings it is argued that the tacit knowledge should be enhanced further within the lecture environment, giving students the skills required alongside the traditional explicit knowledge. Further research is needed to assess the impact of such preparation methods in order to continually inform high quality teaching and learning at these universities within the associated modules.

**Word count 6442**

## **References**

- Beck, U. (1992) *Risk Society: towards a new modernity*, London: Sage.
- Bonwell, C. and Eison, J. (1991) *Active learning: creating excitement in the classroom*. Washington: ASHE-ERIC Reports.
- Bourner, T., and Ellerker, M. (1998) 'Sandwich Placements; Improving the Learning Experience – Part 1', *Education and Training*, **40**, pp. 283–287.
- Bridges, D. (1993) 'Transferable skills: a philosophical perspective', *Studies in Higher Education*, **18**(1), pp. 43-51.

- British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018) *Ethical guidelines for educational research*. London: BERA Publications.
- Brooks, R. and Youngson, P. (2016) 'Undergraduate work placements: an analysis of the effects on career progression, *Studies in Higher Education*, **41**(9), pp. 1563-1578.
- Bullock, K., Gould, V., Hejmadi, M. and Lock, G. (2009) 'Work placement experience: should I stay or should I go?' *Higher Education Research and Development*, **28**(5), pp. 481-494.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., and Morrison, K. (2007) *Research methods in Education*,
- Cottrell, S. (2015) *Skills for Success - Personal Development and Employability*, Palgrave.
- Criticos, C. (1993), *Experiential learning and social transformation for a post-apartheid learning future*. In Boud, D., Cohen, R. and Walker, D. (Eds), *Using Experience for Learning*, Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, Buckingham, pp. 157-68. Cited in: Walmsley, A., Thomas, R. and Jameson, S. (2006) 'Surprise and sense making: undergraduate placement experiences in SMES', *Education and Training*, **48**(5), pp. 360-372.
- Dearing, R. (Chair) (1997) *Higher Education in the Learning Society: Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education*, London: HMSO.
- Denscombe, M. (2014) *The good research guide*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Maidenhead: McGraw Hill.
- Denzin, N. (1988) *The research act: a theoretical introduction to sociological methods*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Dey, D., Lindsay, A. and Thomson, P. (2017) 'Supporting Student Transition into Professional Practice', *Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice*, **5**(2), pp. 115-118.
- EECERA (2015) *Ethical code for early childhood researchers*, [online] Available from: <http://www.eecera.org/documents/pdf/organisation/EECERA-Ethical-Code.pdf> [Accessed 24th February 2017].
- Ehiyazaryan, E., and N. Barraclough, N. (2009) 'Enhancing Employability: Integrating Real World Experience in the Curriculum', *Education and Training*, **51**(4), pp. 292-308.
- Eraut, M. (2007) Learning from other people in the workplace. *Oxford Review of Education*. **33**(3), pp. 403-422.
- Finch, D., Hamilton, L., Riley, B. and Zehner, M. (2013) An exploratory study of factors affecting undergraduate employability. *Education and Training*. **55**(7), pp. 681-704.
- Harris-Reeves, B. and Mahoney, J. (2017) 'Brief work-integrated learning opportunities and first-year university students' perceptions of employability and academic performance', *Australian Journal of Career Development*, **26**(1), pp. 32-37.
- Harvey, L., Moon, S. and Geall, V. (1997) *Graduates' work: Organisational change and students attributes*, Centre for Research into Quality, Online at <http://heer.qaa.ac.uk/SearchForSummaries/Summaries/Pages/GLM48.aspx> on 27th July 2017.
- HEFCE (2017) *The TEF*. Online at <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/tef/> on 25th January 2018.

Jackson, D. (2015) 'Employability skill development in work-integrated learning: Barriers and best practice', *Studies in Higher Education*, **40**(2), pp. 350-367.

Jackson, D. and Wilton, N. (2016) 'Developing career management competencies among undergraduates and the role of work-integrated learning', *Teaching in Higher Education*, **21**(3), p. 266-286.

Knight, P., and Yorke, M. (2004) *Learning, Curriculum and Employability in Higher Education*, London: Routledge Falmer.

Kolb, D. (1984) *Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Macy, M., Squires, J. and Barton, E. (2009) 'Providing optimal opportunities: Structuring practicum experiences in early intervention and early childhood special education preservice program', *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, **28**, pp.209–18.

McFarland, L., Saunders, R. and Allen, S. (2008) 'Learning and Teaching Positive Guidance Skills: Lessons from Early Childhood Practicum Students', *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, **29**(3), pp. 204-221.

McMillan, D. (2009) 'Preparing for educare: student perspectives on early years training in Northern Ireland', *International Journal of Early Years Education*, **17**(3), pp. 219-235.

Moloney, M. (2017) *Project update: Phase 2 of PLÉ research: An exploration of the Professional Practice Placement Component of Early Childhood Education and Care Degree Programmes in Ireland*. Working paper. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.36004.48001

Moody, J. (2009) 'Key elements in a positive practicum: Insights from Australian post-primary pre-service teachers', *Irish Educational Studies*, **28**(2), pp.155–75.

Musgrave, J. and Stobbs, N. (2015) *Early Years placements: a critical guide to outstanding work-based learning*, Northwich: Critical Publishing.

Neill, N. and Mulholland, G. (2003) 'Student placement - structure, skills and e-support', *Education and Training*, **45**(2), pp. 89-99.

Nutbrown, C. (2012) Foundations for Quality, *The independent review of early education and childcare qualifications*, Runcorn: Crown Copyright. Accessed online at [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/175463/Nutbrown-Review.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/175463/Nutbrown-Review.pdf) on 25th July 2017.

Pegg, A., Waldock, J., Hendy-Isaac, S. and Todd, M. (2012) *Pedagogy for Employability*, York: Higher Education Academy.

Price, L., Hastie, L., Duffy, K., Ness, V. and McCallum, J. (2011) 'Supporting students in clinical practice: pre-registration nursing students' views on the role of the lecturer', *Nurse Education Today*, **31**, pp. 780-784.

Quality Assurance Agency (2007) *QAA code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education: section 9 – work-based and placement learning*.

Reid, J. (2016) 'Engaging with childhood: student placements and the employability gender', *Childhood*, **23**(2), pp.286 - 300.

Robson, C. (2002) *Real world research*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Rouse, L., Morrissey, A. and Rahimi, M. (2012) 'Problematic placement: pathways pre-service teachers' perspectives on their infant/toddler placement', *Early Years*, **32**(1), pp. 87-98.

Thompson, D. (2016) 'How valuable is 'short project' placement experience to higher education students?', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, **41**(3), pp. 413-424.

Te Wiata I (2001) A big ask: To what extent can universities develop useful generic skills? In F. Bevan, C. Kanes & D. Roebuck (Eds.) *Knowledge demands for the new economy* (pp. 290–297) Brisbane, Australia: Australian Academic Press. Cited in: Crebert, G., Bates, M., Bell, B., Patrick, C-J. and Cragolini, V. (2004) 'Developing generic skills at university, during work placement and in employment: graduates' perceptions', *Higher Education Research and Development*, **23**(2), pp. 147-165.

Walmsley, A., Thomas, R. and Jameson, S. (2006) 'Surprise and sense making: undergraduate placement experiences in SMES', *Education and Training*, **48**(5), pp. 360-372.

Yin, R. (2014) *Case study research: design and methods*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. London: Sage Publications.