



Student placement service

An exploratory investigation of employer retention and a “Priority Partner” intervention

Student
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service

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the factors relating to retention of employers on an undergraduate work placement programme in a third level institution.

Design/methodology/approach – An action research methodology involving problem diagnosis, intervention planning, action and evaluation is employed. The diagnosis involved a survey of 130 employers that had taken students on placement during the first two years of the placement programme. The action research also involved workshops with the work placement team and the making of an intervention with respect to enhancing the placement process through the introduction of a Priority Partner initiative for 26 of the employers.

Findings – The survey findings reveal differences in the ranking of importance of college selection criteria by employers, as well the impact of the placement manager’s characteristics on the placement process. The intervention findings show that the employer retention percentage increased for the Priority Partners but remained the same for the other employers.

Research limitations/implications – The study reports qualitative findings in the context of a placement programme in one institution which limits external validity.

Practical implications – Employer retention would seem to be improved with the development of a customer relations management orientation with employers. The role of the placement manager is pivotal to enhancing the retention of employers as is the quality and professionalism of the work placement service.

Originality/value – New empirical data extends the very limited understanding of company retention on work placement programmes.

Keywords Student work placement, Employers, Action research, Cooperative education, Internship, Students

Paper type Case study

Introduction

This study was undertaken to investigate employer retention in the work placement programme of the Bachelor of Business Studies (BBS) (Honours) degree at Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) in Ireland and to undertake action research (AR) to try and improve retention from one year to the next. For the purpose of this paper, employer retention refers to a third-level institution retaining an employer for undergraduate student work placement from one year to the following year. For example, if 100 employers take students on work placement in year one and 25 of the same employers take students again in year two, this represents a 25 per cent employer retention rate.

The term work placement programme adopted here has been used interchangeably in the literature with internship, cooperative education, work-integrated learning, practicum and industry experience (see Ellis, 1999; Cooper *et al.*, 1999; Fleming and Ferkins, 2005; Abeysekera, 2006; Zopiatis, 2007; O’Shea and Watson, 2007). Internship is defined as “an undertaking with a focus on the provision of real world experience to those whose preoccupation has been with formal learning” (Dodge and McKeough, 2003). The authors prefer to use the term work placement in this paper as the BBS



degree work placement at WIT is a paid work placement programme for third year undergraduates lasting between six and eight months in duration.

In the first year of the BBS work placement programme in the academic year 2006/2007, 166 students were placed with 101 employers. Anecdotal evidence from employers suggested that they were generally satisfied with the students' performance. In the second year of running, year 2007/2008, it was observed that only 26 per cent of the participating employers in the 2006/2007 year repeated their participation in 2007/2008.

For the WIT Work Placement Team, there is a great deal of work involved in procuring work placement positions from new employers, ones that have not provided placement positions in the past. The competition in the region includes other colleges, e.g. the University of Limerick (doing work placement for over 30 years and with approximately 400 students from the School of Business to place each year), University College Cork, Carlow Institute of Technology and the Dublin universities and institutes. Therefore employer retention is important to the WIT work placement team and the low level of employer retention was the catalyst for this AR project.

Literature review

The approach to the literature review has been informed by AR literature, specifically Coghlan and Brannick (2005): "not only are you reviewing the social context of your project, you also review and critique the research that has been done in that context". There is a limited amount of literature on the key subject of work placement with calls for more research in the area (Ryan *et al.*, 1996), notwithstanding a very strong mandate from employers for students to acquire more work experience (Dearing, 1997). One of the key points made in the literature reviewed is that the work placement function from the college perspective is markedly similar to a normal supplier/customer relationship where the supplier is offering a temporary labour service, like a professional recruitment company (Winfield and Ellis, 1993). As such, the management of the relationship between the supplier (the college) and the employer should be performed in a professional manner, just like a supplier/customer relationship.

There is a three-way partnership between the employer, the student and the college in a work placement contract. This study examines specifically the relationship between the college work placement team and employers. While it has been motivated by the need to address a real organisational issue (i.e. a low-retention rate for employers), it also identifies a gap in the academic literature and therefore aims to make some contribution in that regard. There has been a disproportionate focus in research to date on the employer and/or employer/student perspective as opposed to the college/employer aspect. "Prior empirical studies of internships have assessed the perspective of only one stakeholder group in isolation, or perhaps two groups (usually students and academics)" (Alpert *et al.*, 2009). There is more research on student and employer benefits of placement (see Walo, 2001; Morse, 2006; O'Shea and Watson, 2007) than on the placement service (Abeysekera, 2006). Given some observations of diversity in practice (Blackwell *et al.*, 2001; Coll and Eames, 2000; Fleming and Ferkins, 2005), there is a need for colleges to formulate their own "framework of good practice" in placement management (Zopiatis, 2007), amidst competition for student placements (Cooper *et al.*, 1999).

The conceptual framework

The major factors that impact the work placement relationship between employers and colleges are illustrated in Figure 1. This paper deals with four of the factors: employers'

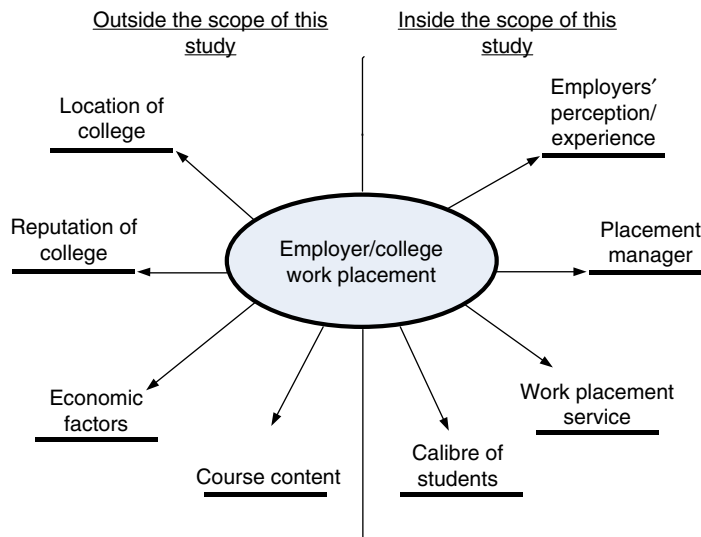


Figure 1.
Conceptual framework
for employer/college
relationship

perception and experience of the college, the calibre of the students, the standard of service provided by the work placement team and the placement manager. The other factors are outside the scope of this study.

Employers' perception of and/or experience with the college

Employers may have graduates of the college in their workforce or may have or have had direct experience of the college for educational, personal, business, sporting or pleasure purposes. "Customer satisfaction with prior service experiences has a positive effect on the length, breadth, and depth of the customer-firm relationship" (Oliver, 1997). Anecdotal knowledge of a college from local and national media may also colour an employer's perception of a college. A national survey of employers involved in work placement in the USA in 1997 found that firms that had close relationships with schools on a variety of measures tended to have low turnover rates (for work placement participation) (Bailey *et al.*, 2000). Trust and reputation are important criteria (Ellis and Moon, 1998a). They point out that once trust is established, "many organisations appear to move from a transaction (or 'one-off') approach to placements, towards a long-term relationship between the company and the supplier university" (Ellis and Moon, 1998b). From their qualitative data, Ellis and Moon (1998a) conclude that employers choose between college work placement services for their ability to provide suitable student candidates for the job description. The quality and reliability of the placement service would seem to be an important part of this process.

The calibre and performance of the students

Employers may have direct experience of the work of graduates from the college or may have anecdotal knowledge of the calibre of the students. Employers that have hired work placement students in the past will have direct on-hand experience of the work of the college students. Ellis and Moon (1998a) conducted a survey in the UK on the importance of certain work placement criteria for employers of work placement students. The respondents were asked to indicate the importance to them of a list of

selection criteria. The two top-ranked criteria related to students with “personal chemistry of the student with the organisation” number one and the “skills of student in relation to the job specification” number two. These arguably conform to normal interview criteria. The personal chemistry of the student with the employer is largely dependent on the interview dynamics and the technical fit of the student with the job specification depends on the course content to a great degree. Both of these are outside the direct control of the work placement team. What the team can control is the pre-selection of the applicants for a placement position to ensure they match the employer’s specifications. They can also help by preparing the students through assistance with CV preparation, through lectures on interview techniques and by the provision of mock interviews. They can try and make the whole work placement process a positive experience for employers, especially making their visits to the college for student interviews enjoyable, efficient and an overall pleasant experience.

Colleges that have their students complete a learning log while on work placement can have direct feedback on the performance of the students if the learning log has an employer’s comments section that is signed by the student’s supervisor. Some colleges have a separate employer feedback form that provides valuable information about the performance of the students. Direct feedback from the employers can be a valuable barometer for a college, providing information about the students’ knowledge, performance, preparedness, professionalism, communication skills and social skills. Information gathered by student mentors from both the employers and the students while visiting students on work placement can also be very valuable. All this direct information about the students’ knowledge and performance can be used when reviewing and updating college course content. Improving the course content and making it more relevant for employers should lead to improved work placement performance by the students.

The standard of service provided by the college work placement team

McMahon and Quinn (1995) note that colleges “must be prepared to invest the necessary resources in the [...] placement function”. Based on the studies of Ellis and Moon (1998a, 1998b), employers generally want to deal with a professional, responsive and efficient placement service. They discuss customer relationship marketing for work placement services stating that “service quality factors are of considerable importance to client organisations for placement services, with local employers particularly concerned to have a high level of customer contact” (Ellis and Moon, 1998b). Key attributes required for the work placement service to be successful include accuracy of information supplied, matching the students to the job specification, speed in handling of problems, speed of response to the company and efficiency in organising interviews (Ellis and Moon, 1998a). In their survey, numbers three to six in importance are about the process-related elements of the placement service provided: accuracy of information provided, handling of problems, speed of response and efficiency in organising interviews. These process-related elements are within the scope of a work placement team and can influence employers in choosing one college over another. These are areas of service that a work placement team can work to continuously improve, which in turn should lead to improvement in the retention of employers. Coll and Eames (2000) state that “a rewarding placement experience not only increases the likelihood of the employer taking on another student in subsequent years, but satisfied employers can be used to help the induction of new employers”. The premise is that improving the service provided by the work placement team should

lead to improvement in company retention. As McMahon and Quinn (1995) state: “there is a clear need for colleges to build up successful relationships with individual employers”. Ellis and Moon (1998b) and Ellis (1999) point out that work placement can be a valuable part of a total customer relations strategy between a college and outside employers. Indeed some employers appear to judge a college as a whole by the perceived quality of its placement service: “[employers’] perceptions of a university are enormously coloured by the quality of the placement service – it’s a window for us” (Ellis and Moon, 1998a).

It is generally accepted that one of the more important and fundamental elements that create and maintain value in an organisation is customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction may facilitate customer loyalty and retention, depending on the viability of competitive offerings (Gustafsson *et al.*, 2005). “In line with prior studies, customer satisfaction has a consistent negative effect on [customer] churn” (and therefore a positive effect on retention) (Gustafsson *et al.*, 2005). They state that “if customer satisfaction is the primary driver of [customer] retention, a firm should improve product or service quality or offer better prices” (Gustafsson *et al.*, 2005). It has been found that it costs more for employers to get new customers rather than re-selling to existing customers: “most managers accept the view that gaining a new customer is more costly than retaining an existing one” (Luck and Lancaster, 2003). “It costs five times more to attract a new customer than it does to keep an existing one” (Kandampully and Duddy, 1999).

The work placement manager

Neill and Mulholland (2003) state that a marketing approach should be adopted in looking at relationships between employers and colleges with regard to work placement. They suggest that the placement manager take on the role of key account manager. A key account is defined as “that of a customer deemed to be of strategic importance by the selling company” (Millman and Wilson, 1996). Ellis and Moon (1998b) state that “the most important role in work placement management is that of the placement manager”. The provision of a good work placement service “requires unique people skills from the placement manager” (Ellis and Moon, 1998b). The placement manager needs to be available to employers for regular communication and to be efficient in responding to employers’ questions and queries: “there is potential for a significant level of interaction [...] between placement managers and employers at varying stages of this process” (Ellis and Moon, 1998b). Regular visits by the manager to major employers may be useful in this regard. The manager should have knowledge, experience in, or empathy for, customer relations management and customer service.

Other factors influencing work placement

The above factors contain the major points investigated in this study in the relationship between employers and colleges. There are other factors that impact work placement activity not covered by this paper; these include general economic conditions, the employers’ financial situation, the reputation and location of the college and the content of college courses. These are deemed to be outside the scope of this paper in that they are mainly outside the control of the colleges involved in work placement or outside the scope of the work placement function.

In summary, there is little research available on college work placement offices’ relationships with employers. The literature that is available suggests that a range of factors involving the students, the placement office, the placement manager and the

employers, are important to the success of the work placement process, including the matching of students with employers' needs and the provision of an accurate, reliable, responsive and efficient placement service. The literature also suggests that there may be scope for taking a customer relations management approach to improve employer retention in work placement.

Research objectives

The overall aim of this study was to investigate and address employer retention in a work placement programme through an AR mode of enquiry. This study looks at introducing relationship marketing ideas to the work placement service provided by the college and attempts to evaluate the outcome of their introduction by measuring improvement in the retention of employers from one year to the next.

More specifically, the objectives were:

- (1) to evaluate the factors determining work placement retention on the BBS work placement programme; and
- (2) to design and implement an appropriate intervention in the work placement programme to address the low employer retention percentage with a view to improving on this percentage.

Conducting the AR

"If you want to truly understand something, try to change it" (Lewin, 1951). Snyder (2009) states that "this proposition captures the essence of the tradition of experimentation, both as it is practiced in basic research (to test hypotheses about causality) and in applied research (to document the effects of interventions)". The change-oriented nature of the research objectives and the interactive nature of the work placement process at WIT made this research project suitable for an AR approach. The process used in this AR study followed the guidelines laid down by Coghlan and Brannick (2005). Of particular relevance was the list of issues and themes "relevant to manager-led action research" (Bartunek *et al.*, 1993). These included the forming of a project team, the formal and informal ways of gathering data, the integration of feedback sessions into the day-to-day work and AR training (Bartunek *et al.*, 1993).

Altrichter *et al.* (2002) note that AR is about people "reflecting upon and improving their own practice by tightly inter-linking their reflection and action and making their experiences public". Coghlan and Brannick (2005) state "you are reflecting on your experiences of diagnosing, planning action, taking action and evaluating action in the project". Zuber-Skerritt and Perry (2002) expand on this by adding that it is "a group of people at work together involved in the cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting more deliberately and systematically than usual". Zuber-Skerritt and Perry (2002) point out that action learning is an important part of AR and it is in reflection that learning is captured and documented. Researchers face two imperatives in AR: solving a problem within an organisation while generating new knowledge and understanding. AR is one way of conducting research that can benefit both the organisation and the body of knowledge. Zuber-Skerritt and Perry (2002) suggest that AR is more appropriate than traditional research for improving practice and for professional and organisational learning.

Figure 2 shows the process followed in this study, based on the four AR phases as identified by Coughlan and Brannick (diagnosis, planning, action and evaluation). The action and evaluation phases were continuous until the end of the study. Reflective learning is an important part of AR and reflection was a critical element of this study.

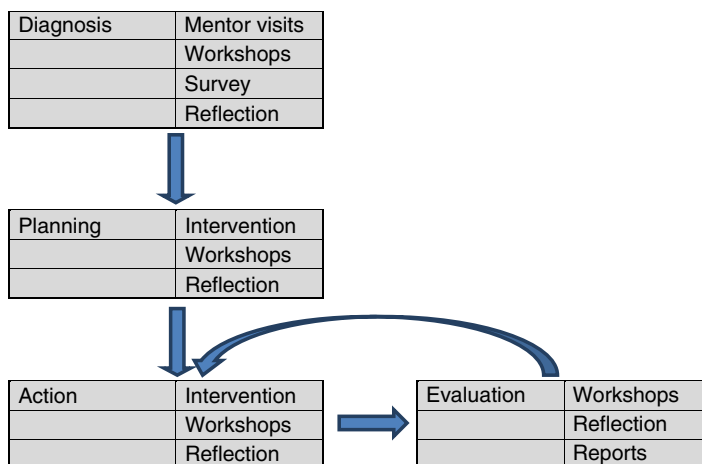


Figure 2.
AR cycle implemented

In this AR project, the work placement duties were performed by the work placement team under the direction of the Director of Work Placement, who was a member of the team and is the lead author of this paper. The work performed by the three-person team was formally documented by the weekly workshop meeting minutes, various reports, memos and e-mails, observations and reflections, all contained in a reflective log. The other participants in the AR were the employers that had taken students in the previous two years. The research part of the paper was conducted by the authors alone. The authors had received training in AR (Bartunek *et al.*, 1993).

The AR project plan

The plan and the study began with mentor visits to students on work placement in the previous academic year, 2007/2008. These visits were used to garner employer feedback on the performance of the students and the work placement process. At the same time the analysis and reporting on the prior year programme was taking place. In total, the plan and this study lasted over a full calendar year and finished with the analysis and reporting on the work placement programme for the academic year 2008/2009. Figure 3 contains a simplified summary of the project plan and shows the timescale.

Employer visits and feedback (diagnosis)

As part of the work placement process in WIT, visits are made to the students on work placement by college-appointed mentors. Mentors included lecturers and some of the work placement team. The purpose of the mentor visit is to check that the students are being treated properly and working in a safe environment and to check with the employers that the students are performing in a satisfactory manner and are integrating well with the existing workforce. The students' learning logs are also inspected during the mentor visits. These visits are also used to get employer inputs to the work placement process and also to do some promotion work for the college, cementing the overall relationship.

Workshop meetings (diagnosis, planning, action, evaluation and reflection)

The weekly workshop meetings were a critical part of the AR and of the work placement process. There were 19 formal documented workshop meetings over the

Activity name	2008												2009	
	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	J	F	
Work placement AR project	→													
Analyse/report on 2007/2008 activity	→													
Mentor visits and feedback	→													
Workshop meetings 1, 2, 3 and 4			I		I	I		I						
Weekly workshop meetings									→					
Design survey of prior participants						→								
Plan survey in detail						→								
Send advance notice of survey							I							
Run pilot survey and fine-tune							II							
Perform survey							→							
Process and evaluate survey								I						
Identify priority partners (PPs)								I						
Draft e-mail and forms for PPs								I						
Initial communication with PPs								I						
Communication with all employers									→					
Interviews and placement offers									→					
Measure retention percentages													I	
Analyse/report on 2008/2009 activity													→	

Figure 3.
A Summary of the AR
project plan and timetable

course of the study. These meetings were attended by the three-person work placement team. These served as a forum for the initial diagnosis, the planning of the project, the actual placement action and evaluation, and the data gathering and reflection for both the day-to-day work and the research, all of which are discussed in the following sections. The team also agreed to place more focus on certain employers, defined as “Priority Partners” (PPs), as part of the AR interventions. The workshops produced weekly interim reports for both management and students. The detailed project plan and timetable (see Figure 3) for the complete work placement cycle from February 2008 to March 2009 was planned and agreed at the earlier meetings. Progress in the placement of students and the retention of employers was monitored and documented against this plan, with action items agreed by the work placement team. There were also informal data gathering and feedback sessions on a daily basis. Reports and historic records of the work placement office were a part of the secondary data used in the project. The team members did indeed “buy into the change project” and allowed the feedback sessions to be “integrated into the work day” (Bartunek *et al.*, 1993). The reflective log captures this:

I had a meeting with the work placement team and we looked at the timetable for the next six months for work placement. They are very supportive. We discussed the survey (Reflective Log, 28 May 2008).

The survey (diagnosis)

Following the identification of the research problem as employer retention within the BBS work placement programme and taking into account inputs from the mentor visits to employers and the analysis and reporting on the prior year work placements, the team decided at a workshop to perform a survey of employers that had taken students in prior years. The survey was sent to 130 of the 140 employers that employed work placement students in 2006/2007 and/or 2007/2008 academic years. Ten employers

were excluded due to location, cessation of business and other reasons of unsuitability. The purpose of the survey was to discover if the students met the requirements of the employers, to get their opinions of the work placement process and solicit any other suggestions that might help to improve the process. The survey also provided an opportunity to replicate the research survey on employer retention criteria by Ellis and Moon (1998a) to see how the responses in Ireland compared to the responses in the UK.

The survey underwent the four stages of pre-testing as outlined by Dillman (2005): review by knowledgeable colleagues and analysts; interviews to evaluate cognitive and motivational qualities, a small pilot survey and a final check. The survey followed recommended methodological practice (Belnaves and Caputi, 2001; De Vaus, 2002; Dillman, 2005). A preliminary pre-pilot run was performed by the work placement team to test the software package and check the layout of the responses. A pilot run of ten respondents was performed using senior lecturers and staff available during the month of August 2008 and one retired staff member with significant business experience. An excerpt from the reflective log of 29 July 2008 illustrates one of the benefits of the pilot run:

I had a meeting with [lecturer one] and [lecturer two] re pilot survey and got their very good feedback on it. [Lecturer one] suggested using the HR-style categories for the student skills questions in the survey – exceeds expectations, meets expectations and below expectations. I thought this was a great idea. I took all inputs re survey into account and modified the survey with changes made to some questions and added two text questions at the end of the survey (“what one thing could we do to improve the process at WIT” may yield very good feedback). Also I improved the instructions for the Ellis and Moon survey question following specific feedback from [lecturer three]. I adjusted the survey to take into account all the good input I received from pilot run and adjusted e-mail addresses for some of the employers based on feedback from the [pre-survey notice] e-mail sent last week to them re survey (Reflective Log, 29 July 2008).

There were 15 major question categories in the survey with sub-sections of single and multi-item rating scales. For most questions, the traditional five-part Likert scales were used of 1-5, where 1 = very important and 5 = not at all important, using measurements that would be familiar to respondents. A sixth “no opinion” box was offered where appropriate to help avoid questions creating artificial opinions by providing a “don’t know” or “prefer not to say” option when the respondent does not have an opinion (De Vaus, 2002). For questions about performance of students, a familiar three-part human resources (HR) scale was used – exceeds expectations, meets expectations or below expectations. The question categories included are in Table I.

The surveys were sent by e-mail to the work placement contact person in each employer; a pre-survey mailing the previous week had given notice that it was coming. The survey was conducted using a third party piece of software called Survey Monkey and the respondents were guaranteed security and confidentiality. Survey responses were completed on-line and sent direct to Survey Monkey without intervention by WIT personnel. The employer contact persons used were mostly HR personnel. For some small employers the contact persons were non-HR personnel (e.g. owner or managing partner). Responses were received from 66 employers, just over 50 per cent of the 130 employers surveyed. Following the mentor visits, the survey was the second major communication with employers.

The PP intervention (diagnosis, planning and action)

A distinguishing feature of AR is the taking of action in a collaborative context to bring about change (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005; Burns, 2007; Herr and Anderson, 2005).

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- 1 How do you rate the work placement process at the School of Business in WIT?
 - 2 How does the WIT work placement process compare to other colleges?
 - 3 How do the WIT students compare with students from other colleges?
 - 4 How satisfied are you with the WIT work placement process?
 - 5 How prepared are WIT students for work placement versus students from other colleges?
 - 6 Please rate WIT versus other colleges for the following aspects: (includes placement service, mentors, communications, interview facilities, responsiveness, reliability)
 - 7 Rating of overall Skills of WIT students (includes overall performance, professionalism, attendance, efficiency)
 - 8 Rating of WIT student work-specific skills (includes 15 sub-questions including time management, IT skills etc.)
 - 9 Rating of WIT students personal skills (includes communication, social skills, maturity, enthusiasm etc.)
 - 10 Would you consider taking WIT students in the future?
 - 11 The economic downturn impact on work placement opportunities in your company (measuring impact on work placement opportunities – will reduce slightly, significantly, have no impact, will increase etc.)
 - 12 What one aspect of the work placement process could we improve upon in WIT in your opinion?
 - 13 What do you consider to be the main benefit to students from work placement?
 - 14 We welcome any other comments or suggestions you may have regarding the WIT work placement programme
 - 15 Could you rate the following criteria in relation to your company's dealings with colleges' work placement services^a

Table I.
The survey question categories

Note: ^aQ15 is a replication of the Ellis and Moon survey conducted with several colleges in the UK in 1998

This section sets out the operationalisation of action, in the form of an employer intervention which builds on the previous diagnosis and planning activities as depicted in Figures 2 and 3.

In response to the open-ended questions in the survey requesting comments and suggestions for improvements to the work placement service, the vast majority of comments received were positive. Some indicated scope to enhance the service, with comments such as: “more communication”, “more interaction with WIT” and “early involvement of our company to select appropriate candidate”. In addition, one respondent stated: “we are interested in building relationships with the college more closely”. Earlier, in the reflective log for 12 March 2008, the following comment was made following mentor visits to employers:

I had discussions with companies visited recently about the work placement programme [...]. thinking now of [...] initiating a “preferred employer partner” programme with some companies to keep them involved in the programme. This would mean some sort of preference for these companies in terms of getting student CVs and getting preference for interviews (Reflective Log, 12 March 2008).

Taking this initial idea and the survey comments received from employers, and taking into account the satisfaction expressed with a range of other factors in the survey, and also acknowledging that the work placement process service quality was completely within the control of the work placement team, there was a collaborative decision reached with the placement team at the workshop meeting of 28 May 2008, informed by the marketing literature, to focus the AR on improving the work placement service. This would be achieved chiefly by the introduction of a “PP” initiative, focusing on key

employers. The aim was to identify PPs among the employers involved in work placement in prior years and enter into a closer partnership with them in order to foster the employer relationship with the programme and ensure employer continuity. The benefits of being a PP would include prioritisation in student interview and selection, and increased communication, both being points made in survey responses. The target employer retention percentage was set at 50 per cent, representing a 92 per cent increase on the previous year.

At the workshop meeting of 28 May 2008 to select the PPs, the work placement team identified 11 major employers from the previous year, which were mainly those that had provided more than one placement position. To these were added the employers that provided work placement positions for students in both the previous two years. This gave a total of 26 PPs out of an employer database of circa 300 employers. An excerpt from the minutes of this workshop meeting captures the process:

Priority Partners/Key Accounts: Different approach: communicate by e-mail with a completed response form in the e-mail for them to confirm, change or reject. Priority will be based on company size, location, job types, number of students normally taken, whether the company has taken students for the last two years etc. Follow up e-mail with phone call. Other companies would get normal letter and blank response form. These priority companies would be offered and would get the benefit of early interviews. We will think about giving the students a list of priority companies (Workshop Meeting Minutes, 28 May 2008).

It was agreed that initial communications with the PPs would be by e-mail as opposed to by letter and that a draft completed response form (setting out their student placement requirements for the coming year based on their requirements in prior years) would be attached to the e-mail for them to confirm, change or reject. It was agreed that PPs would be offered a choice of interview dates at the beginning of the semester and to have first choice of students; their response form would contain a list of dates for them to choose from, although not all would be offered the same choices. This initial communication informed the PPs that this “PP” status had been conferred on them and what this entailed, as suggested by Millman and Wilson (1996); they suggest that the very act of informing a customer that it was a key or special customer helped with customer satisfaction and retention. A follow up e-mail was sent if there was no response from a PP and this was followed by regular phone calls by the Director of Work Placement. An excerpt from the workshop minutes of 16 September 2008 is an example of the attention given to the PPs at the formal weekly meetings:

Of the 26 [Priority Partners], responses have been received from 16, 15 positive and one negative. Frank [placement director] will follow up the 10 who have not responded yet. XXXX [employer name], one of our partners, will have a representative on site this week. Frank will make contact with her while she is here. YYYY [employer name] are hoping to be here for interviews on 22nd. We discussed possible additional communications with Priority Partners, perhaps using the mentors to contact them from time to time or Frank to do this. This arises from comments made on the survey (Workshop Meeting Minutes, 16 September 2008).

The students were provided with a list of potential employers from the database with the PPs listed on top of this list, giving them more prominence. The students used this list to signal their initial employer preferences, if any, to the work placement team. In this way, a potential match was made between PPs (and other employers) and students.

In conclusion, the AR process comprised placement diagnosis including a survey and the planning of an intervention, an employer-partnership programme. The next

section presents and analyses the findings of the survey and the PP intervention, the action and evaluation section.

Findings and analysis (action and evaluation)

The findings are presented and discussed in line with the research objectives, namely the evaluation of the factors determining employer retention in work placement programmes and the outcome of an intervention made. There are three major findings sections: first, survey results (questions 1-14); second, Ellis and Moon replication survey results comparison (question 15); and third, PPs intervention.

Section 1: survey findings and evaluation

There were 66 respondents out of 130 employers surveyed, a response percentage of 50.7 per cent. The respondents were from a diversified range of employers with a diversified geographic spread. Table II illustrates the details of the respondents' employment sector, showing the number of employers who use WIT only for work placement students and those who use WIT and other colleges; 31 or 47 per cent of the respondents use WIT as the sole source for work placement students. Nine of the 35 multi-college employers and five of the 31 "WIT only" were eventually chosen as PPs. The other 12 PPs did not complete the survey.

The survey indicated that the students largely meet or exceed the employers' expectations (see Table III), implying that there is a good matching of employers' needs and expectations with the students provided by the work placement process. The main purpose was to establish whether the bulk of the WIT students at least met employer

Employer sector	Total number	Multi-college	WIT only
Small/medium enterprises (SMEs)	16	7	9
Small accountants	13	2	11
Multinational companies	8	8	0
Banking/financial services	7	5	2
Utilities and energy entities	7	4	3
Big 4 audit companies	4	4	0
Insurance companies	3	2	1
Technology sector	3	2	1
Public service	3	1	2
Construction industry	2	0	2
Total	66	35	31

Table II.
Employer sector of
survey respondents

Note: WIT-only employers do not use other colleges for work placement

	Exceeds expectations (%)	Meets expectations (%)	Below expectations (%)
Overall performance and quality of work	41.3	55.6	3.1
Professionalism – appearance and general conduct	47.6	52.4	0.0
Attendance/punctuality	44.4	54.0	1.6
Overall efficiency	41.3	54.0	4.7

Table III.
Rating of overall skills
of WIT students

expectations and the low percentages below expectations suggest that this was the case.

In response to the question “would you consider taking WIT students in the future”, the responses were positive: 64.6 per cent stated “most definitely” and 23.1 per cent stated “probably”, a total of almost 88 per cent (see Table IV). These responses again suggest that the calibre of the students may not be a reason for the non-retention of employers.

In relation to the work placement process, 92.5 per cent of the respondents rated it “very good” or “good”. When asked to compare the WIT placement process to other colleges (question 3 in survey), which excluded the 31 employers that do not use other colleges, none of the respondents rated it “worse” or “much worse” than other colleges. When asked to rate WIT as a college v. other colleges for various aspects of work placement, over 20 per cent rated WIT “better”, with the exception of interview facilities, with the remainder mostly rating it “the same” with minor exceptions (see Table V).

It can therefore be argued that the WIT placement process (including key attributes like responsiveness, reliability and matching of students with employer needs), the calibre of WIT students and competition from other colleges can be eliminated as major causes of the non-retention of employers in 2007/2008. The responses to other survey questions supported this argument but they are not included here for brevity purposes. As part of the AR cycle, the survey results were shared with all employers and placed on the School of Business web site.

Section 2: comparison with the Ellis and Moon Survey from 1998

The second finding, from the answers to survey question 15, was to discover the ranking of the “criteria valued by employers” by the WIT employers, allowing us to compare this with the ranking established by Ellis and Moon in their study in the UK in 1998. The survey established some differences in results, but in this study the importance of having a professional placement service was reinforced as was

	Response percent
Most definitely	64.6
Probably	23.1
Not Sure	9.3
Probably Not	1.5
Most Definitely Not	1.5

Table IV.
Taking WIT students
in the future

	Better (%)	The same (%)	Worse (%)	Don't use other colleges ^a (%)
WIT Work placement team	23.4	29.7	0.0	46.9
Communications from WIT	28.6	25.4	3.2	42.8
WIT student mentors	23.0	27.9	1.6	47.5
WIT interview facilities	8.9	35.7	1.8	53.6
Responsiveness of placement team	22.2	33.3	0.0	44.5
Reliability of the placement service	23.8	31.7	0.0	44.5

Table V.
Rating of WIT v.
other colleges

the importance of the placement manager. Before examining the results it is important to note some differences between the two surveys. Ellis and Moon conducted a survey of ca. 350 employers and received 162 usable responses or 46 per cent. "The majority of the sample (63 per cent) were large organisations (over 500 employees) and 80 per cent of respondents were in the private sector" (Ellis and Moon, 1998a). It is not stated if the placements were paid or unpaid. They found that over a third of their respondents (37 per cent) "claimed to consciously decide whether or not to use the placement service again, thus indicating the importance of skilful management of the placement relationship, irrespective of the suitability of students" (Ellis and Moon, 1998a). The employers they surveyed used various colleges for work placement. The economic background to the two surveys was different also. In 1998 the UK economy real GDP was growing at 3.8 per cent and grew at 3.7 per cent in 1999. The Irish economy was contracting in 2008 and 2009 with real GDP contracting at 3 and 7 per cent, respectively (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2011). So there are differences between the surveys in terms of paid/unpaid placements, survey respondents characteristics, number of participants and economic background and the comparisons from one to the other should consider interpretation within these contexts.

Table VI presents the WIT survey findings and compares these to the Ellis and Moon (1998a) survey findings. Employers were asked to rate 18 criteria by importance. Table II earlier contains the employer sectors of the WIT respondents, with about 50 per cent of respondents estimated to have more than 500 employees (authors' estimate counting multinationals, some banks, some insurance employers, the technology sector and public service in that total).

The results show that the top six criteria are similar (but in a different order) for both surveys except for one major exception: in the WIT survey, the "placement manager's understanding of client needs" was deemed to be the most important criterion whereas in Ellis and Moon (1998a) this was found to be number eight. In Ellis

WIT Rank	E&M Rank	Criteria	Mean scores	
			WIT	E&M
1	8	Placement manager's understanding of client's needs	1.52	2.12
2	3	Accuracy of information provided by placement service	1.54	1.84
3	2	Skills of student in relation to job specification	1.57	1.49
4	4	Placement services handling of any problems	1.59	2.01
5	1	Personal chemistry of student with organisation	1.61	1.36
6	5	Placement service's speed of response to client's request	1.67	2.08
7	13	Level of trust between respondent and placement manager	1.68	2.42
8	9	Content of college's courses	1.71	2.17
9	6	Placement service's efficiency in organising interviews	1.73	2.08
10	12	Reputation of college	1.80	2.37
10	14	Placement's manager's ability to collaborate	1.80	2.48
12	10	Respondent's experience of the college	1.84	2.27
13	7	Costs in terms of management time	1.95	2.11
14	11	Costs in terms of student's salary and any related costs	2.08	2.31
15	16	Placement manager's willingness to visit client	2.10	3.01
16	17	Physical appearance of college staff	2.55	3.42
17	15	Location of college	2.76	2.91
18	18	Physical appearance of college facilities	2.84	3.74

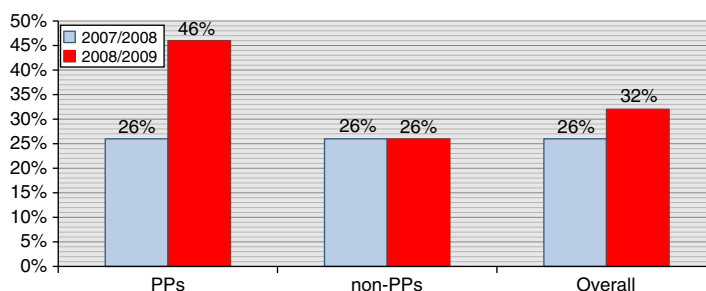
Table VI.
Comparison of WIT
survey with Ellis and
Moon (E&M) survey

and Moon's (1998a) survey, the personal chemistry between the student and employer is the number one criterion by a significant margin (see mean scores in Table VI). The ranking of "accuracy of information provided by placement service" as number two in the WIT survey is also somewhat surprising as it ranks ahead of the "skills of the student", ranked third, and "personal chemistry of student with organisation" as fifth. The fourth shared ranking is taken by "placement services handling of any problems". Another difference between the surveys is the ranking of "costs in terms of management time" as 13th for WIT and seventh for Ellis and Moon (1998a). In the WIT survey, seventh rank is occupied by "level of trust between respondent and placement manager"; this ranks 13th in Ellis and Moon's (1998a) survey. The "content of college's courses" was ranked eighth in the WIT survey v. ninth in the Ellis and Moon (1998a) survey. The WIT survey would seem to suggest that the Irish employers using WIT for work placement place a high emphasis on the work placement team, on the work placement manager and on the relationship between the employer and the placement team. The responses to both surveys suggest the importance of trust, accuracy and understanding of customer needs in the college-employer relationship and also the need for efficiency and speed of response by the placement service. These service-related attributes are very similar to those required in a supplier and customer relationship and provide support to the introduction of the PPs intervention. This supports one of the conclusions from Ellis and Moon's paper that marketing concepts can be applied to the work placement marketplace and are useful in providing insights into why employers choose to do repeat placement business with a college.

Section 3: the PP intervention evaluation

There was an increase in retention for the PPs v. the non-PPs, with 46 per cent (12 of 26) of PPs retained from one year to the next. There was no change to the retention of non-PPs at 26 per cent retention. The overall retention percentage went up to 32 per cent due to the improved retention for PPs. The overall retention target set by the work placement team was 50 per cent and the PPs almost reached this target, although overall the target was missed and may have been too optimistic in the prevailing economic climate (see Figure 4).

The employer retention literature reviewed supports the decision of the work placement team to recognise key customers and introduce a preferential process for



Notes: The 2007/2008 percentage of 26 per cent was the overall employer retention percentage for that year. There was no priority partner programme for that year, the second year of the placement programme.

Figure 4.
Employer retention
percentages information
2007/2008 and 2008/2009

them. The enhanced placement process put in place for PPs is supported by the findings of Bolton *et al.*'s (2008) that the decision to select (and re-select) a particular service is heavily influenced by organisations' perceptions of service quality. Serving the customer better should contribute to customer satisfaction and therefore customer retention (McKenzie, 2001). The results achieved suggest that relationship marketing is relevant to work placement services.

It is recognised that some employers recruit placement students from prior years as permanent employees when they graduate and that this could potentially result in these employers not being retained for placements in subsequent years; this is especially so for smaller employers. It is known that this happened to our students and this was expected; it would be disappointing if it did not happen. Three PPs did not recruit work placement students in 2008/2009 as they had hired the students they had on placement the previous year when they graduated. Some other employers, notably the large accounting companies, also employed prior year placement students when they graduated, but still took on some more work placement students the following year. Some non-PPs companies, however, did not participate due to hiring the work placement students after graduation and so they were not retained. This phenomenon must affect all college work placement programmes. We do not have exact numbers for these cases but it would be an interesting area for future research.

Economic considerations

Although economic factors are outside the scope of this paper, they have been found to have an impact on higher education institutes (Cheng *et al.*, 2002; Lauer, 2002). In the context of this study, as noted earlier, the Irish economy's real GDP contracted by 3 per cent in 2008 and 7 per cent in 2009 (OECD, 2011). It can be argued that during times of economic uncertainty, customer-relationship interventions in non-essential service areas may not provide the same return as that gained in normal economic times. Indeed 58 per cent of the survey respondents stated that the economic downturn would impact work placement opportunities in their companies. Employers might rate the students and the work placement process highly and have an empathy with the college but they can do without the assistance of work placement students when times are uncertain. This became very evident during this study when employers that had originally indicated their participation in work placement in their response forms changed their minds later in the work placement cycle (Reflective Log, November-December, 2008). Of the 14 PPs that did not take students, nine cited economic reasons as the main reason for non-participation (this information was gathered in telephone calls and e-mails). Three of these were financial institutions, three were accounting companies, two were in manufacturing and one was in the public sector. One other PP went into liquidation during the year and three hired the prior year work placement students as fulltime employees following their graduation.

Conclusions

This study set out to instigate change through AR in the context of increasing retention of employers for student work placement. These findings have implications for institutions with work placement programmes and contribute to the literature in the college work placement field. The targeting of selected key employers for priority treatment using customer retention techniques and the nurturing and fostering of closer relationships with these employers would seem to assist in the retention of employers for work placement from year to year and may reduce the time and the level

of work required to place students as well as providing some certainty of availability of placement positions. The benefits include a more nuanced understanding of employer needs and less time and effort devoted to finding new employers (Luck and Lancaster, 2003; Kandampully and Duddy, 1999) with a more efficient use of college resources. It also provides the college with the possibility of exerting more influence on the placement experience for the students through the deeper and more developed relationship with the key employers. There is also by extension a potential for long-term leveraging of the employer relationships with PPs beyond work placement into areas of research collaborations, post-graduate recruitment possibilities, employer input into course curricula and employer sponsorship and scholarship provision.

The findings also indicate that the role of the placement manager is important in the work placement environment; employers want to deal with a manager they can trust, who understands their needs and with whom they can collaborate. The placement manager needs to have good people skills. The study confirms that employers desire to deal with a professional, responsive, efficient placement service that provides accurate information and works at matching the students with the job specifications as well as providing an efficient interview process.

This study is limited to one educational institution and one year of work placement activity and is limited to evaluating the outcomes of an AR cycle intervention over a one-year period. The impact of the customer-relations interventions may be felt over a longer time period. The study looks at student work placement from the perspective of the college and the employers involved and therefore excludes other stakeholders such as the students' perspective. Findings must also be interpreted in the context of PP selection. The process used in selecting PPs from the many employers at the beginning of the study could possibly place limitations on the interpretation of the results. It could be suggested that the PPs, by the nature of the selection process, had a greater chance of being retained than the other employers anyway.

The work placement option was introduced to the BBS degree programme in the academic year 2006/2007. This study was conducted in the academic year 2008/2009, the third year of operation, which positions the placement process in the early phase of development. The survey question on the ranking by employers of various retention criteria was conducted with employers from one education institution whereas the survey conducted by Ellis and Moon in 1998 was among employers linked to or taking placement students from multiple education institutions. Therefore the comparisons between them should be viewed within this context. The replication of the Ellis and Moon survey has highlighted differences in the ranking of factors relevant to employers in taking on placement students. Why is the placement manager's understanding of client needs and trust between the client and the placement manager more highly ranked in an Irish context? Why is student chemistry and the cost of management time perceived to be of much greater importance in a UK context? Such questions would suggest that further research using in-depth interviewing might reveal answers to these questions. A further replication of the Ellis and Moon study on criteria for employer retention using employers from multiple colleges in Ireland would provide an interesting contrast to the original study and this study from WIT. This replication could keep the 18 questions that were in the original survey or some further criteria could be added. Such a study should investigate and compare the organisation sizes and industry sectors of the respondents. Perhaps such a study could be also be performed in the UK and comparisons made between both studies.

Future research might consider examining characteristics of the placement manager and how these might influence the development of college-employer relations. Future research could also include more controlled field experiments in the area of unpaid placements or placement programmes with both paid and unpaid placements.

Other factors outside the remit of this study that potentially can impact the retention of employers for work placements include changes in the general economic climate, changes in the length of time for placements or differences in length of placement time between institutions, changes in placement office personnel and changes in employer management structures including HR personnel in the recruiting employers. To understand their influence a study of a longitudinal nature would be more appropriate to evaluate the impact of such changes over time.

While this study has focused on employer retention for the placement of students, future research could usefully distinguish between retention and recruitment variables in relation to the range of factors identified in this paper, for example the cost of gaining v. retaining employers for work placement. It was noted in this study that some employers did not participate in taking placement students because they hired the prior year placement students as permanent employees after graduation. This is likely to have an effect on all college work placement programmes and would be an interesting area for some future research across multiple colleges. Although not incorporated into the design of this study, the authors recommend the conducting of follow-up interviews with employers that were treated as PPs and with those who were not treated as such, to capture their perceptions of the placement experience.

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