



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

Journal:	<i>Journal of Further and Higher Education</i>
Manuscript ID	CJFH-2019-0114.R2
Manuscript Type:	Original Paper
Keywords:	placement, higher education, England, workplace learning, Early Childhood Studies, explicit knowledge

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

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3 McFarland, Saunders and Allen (2008) recognised that students completing a Human Development
4 undergraduate degree felt that practical experience allowed them to practice skills they had learnt
5 about in lectures and this was of the highest significance for them. In contrast, Thompson (2016)
6 argues that students preferred a more traditional delivery of content in the form of lectures and
7 seminars. This is further reinforced by Pegg *et al.* (2012, p.32) who acknowledge that 'lecture-based
8 teaching methods are still important in developing theoretical and abstract conceptual knowledge'.
9 Price *et al.* (2011) researched students' views on the role of their lecturer during a nursing degree,
10 concluding that students felt academic support for assignments was the most important part of the
11 role. That said, studies have found that students are keen to receive a greater amount of preparation
12 for placement and the associated assessments, as they view this as an essential aspect of their degree
13 programme (Musgrave and Stobbs, 2015; Moloney, 2017).
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28 All things considered, it can be concluded that students who take part in a placement experience
29 alongside academic study therefore have the opportunity to maximise their learning (Neill and
30 Mulholland, 2003).
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36 ***Employability and skills***

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39 Cottrell (2015, p. 250) describes employability as being 'a concurrence of capability, preparedness for
40 employment and the relevance of these to the current job market', whilst Jackson and Wilton (2016)
41 highlight the growing importance of developing employable graduates in an ever-competitive
42 economic market. Pegg *et al.* (2012) explore several definitions of employability and recognise the
43 wide variability in institutional and national contexts when considering what this looks like.
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49 Internationally, the picture seems similar. For example, a Canadian study conducted by Finch *et al.*
50 (2013) concluded that employers are most interested in five key employability attributes: soft skills
51 (for example communication and interpersonal skills), problem-solving skills (such as critical
52 thinking), pre-graduate experience (such as placements and work experience), some functional skills
53 (for example specific knowledge) and academic reputation (degree classification and reputation of
54 institution).
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4 A work placement experience allows students to develop and enhance key employability skills such
5 as communication, problem-solving in a workplace, and self-management (Bridges, 1993). More
6 recently, Harris -Reeves and Mahoney (2017) suggest that work-based learning ‘contribute[s] to the
7 development of employability skills to prepare students for the workplace through applying
8 knowledge and skills in real-world settings’ (p. 33). This suggestion from Australasia supports
9 previous ideas that it is a blend of traditional learning methods and practical experience which
10 supports the employability of students. It has been argued by Knight and Yorke (2004) that even a
11 short placement experience can contribute positively to a student’s skills set and their employability.

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

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25 All of this literature reinforces the need for Early Years degrees to ensure the two elements are
26 fostered, both knowledge and practice, in order to enhance future employability and the confidence of
27 the workforce. It is therefore argued that these two elements are those which need to be considered as
28 essential for engagement within a placement experience. Both the explicit and the tacit knowledge is
29 therefore essential, with the explicit knowledge coming from the classroom and the tacit coming from
30 the placement. With these key concepts considered, it is important to understand the context in which
31 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
Is placement compulsory?	No	Yes
At what level of studies is placement offered?	Level 5 & 6	Level 4, 5 & 6
How many days have to be attended?	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

Teaching hours before placement	20 hours at level 5 10 hours at level 6 <i>Plus independent study for both</i>	32 hours at all levels
Support before placement	Lectures Seminars Workshops Module handbook Online information	Lectures Online information Mentor support Handbook
Teaching hours after placement	0 teaching hours NB. an optional day for reflection is offered	8 hours
Number of credits associated with the related modules	20 credits at both levels	40 credits at all levels
Support whilst students are on placement	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

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3 study explores the key issues that impact upon participants and this was the intention. An interpretive
4 paradigm was the approach as the intention was to analyse views and opinions. Yin (2014:220)
5 defines interpretivism as ‘presenting participant’s multiple perspectives and meanings’.
6 Interpreting the perspectives of students from the two institutions occurred in the way as described
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8 below.
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14 Participants completed two online questionnaires anonymously, one considering how they felt just
15 before their placement experience began, and one reflecting after the placement. Both questionnaires
16 had a selection of open and closed ended questions, allowing for a mix of quantitative and qualitative
17 data to be collected. Although the questionnaires included statistical elements the study was still
18 deemed to be within the qualitative vein as the overall aim was to interpret the views and opinions
19 that these statistics represented. These questionnaires were distributed through an online survey
20 website to ensure that the responses were kept anonymous and confidential. It was noted that there
21 may be concerns, ethically, with the perception of power in this study. This will be discussed in time.
22 The questionnaires were introduced to the students by their lecturers who were responsible for the
23 module.
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36 Although participants cannot be coerced into completing a questionnaire (Cohen, Manion and
37 Morrison, 2007), it was important that students were not made to feel that their completion of these
38 surveys, or the answers that they gave, had any bearing on their success at placement or within the
39 module. This was the main reason for a questionnaire being the method of choice. Although valuable
40 data can be obtained (Denscombe, 2014), focus groups and interviews were disregarded as a possible
41 option as they may have caused discomfort for the participants, therefore may not have produced
42 reliable findings.
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52 The responses collected from both universities were then analysed in a number of ways. Firstly,
53 significant findings were thematically analysed as a whole, to look collectively at student’s feelings
54 about academic support and placement experiences in higher education. Secondly, findings were
55 viewed comparatively between responses from each university, looking for significant variations in
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3 responses from each of the universities and considering the reasons for this (perhaps module layout,
4 content, contact time). Additionally, responses were compared to ascertain feelings around confidence
5 and preparation prior to the placements, with feelings following the placements, and to establish how
6 students felt they progressed.
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11 12 ***Sample***

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14 Purposive sampling (Denscombe, 2014) was undertaken throughout this research. All ECS students
15 at both universities, who were being prepared to go out on placement for the first time and who were
16 taking these relevant modules, were invited to take part in the research study. Of the 111 students
17 across both cohorts, 39 responded to questionnaire 1 and 26 responded to questionnaire 2, giving a
18 36% and 23% representation of the cohort respectively.
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26 27 ***Ethical considerations***

28 As mentioned previously, all questionnaires were completed in a confidential fashion and results were
29 anonymous. Questions were worded as such that it was not possible to identify participants from their
30 responses. A consent form was devised and was completed prior to the completion of the
31 questionnaire which set out all of the considerations and ensured that ethical guidelines (BERA, 2018;
32 EECERA, 2015) were adhered to. Participants were given access to the findings of the study once
33 completed.
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42 43 ***Triangulation***

44 Robson (2002) recognises that triangulation through literature is an acceptable method and due to the
45 ethical considerations of how students were consulted (see above) this was deemed appropriate in this
46 study. Denzin (1988) also alleges that observer triangulation; more than one observer being involved
47 in the study is a useful tool. It could be argued that as this study was undertaken by two researchers
48 from different institutions, that this gave the element of observer triangulation.
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56 57 ***Findings***

58 59 ***Prior to placement***

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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.

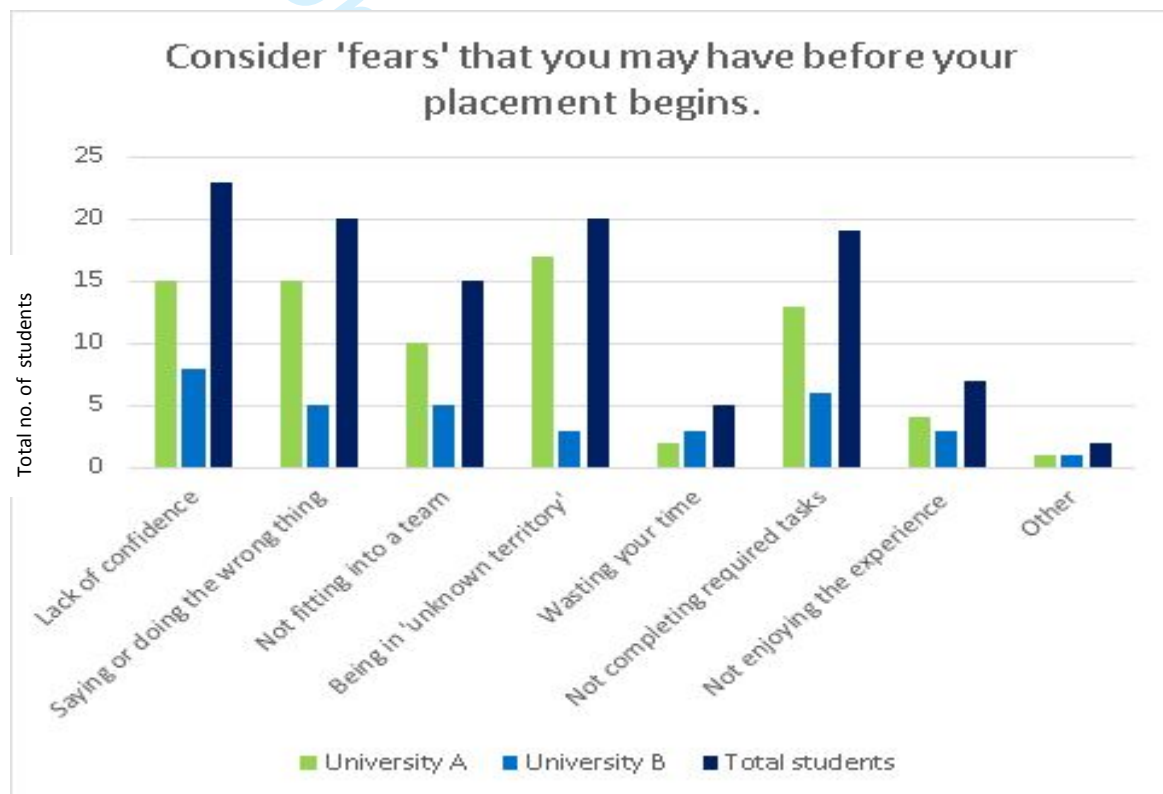


Fig. 1 above indicates that students had a range of things that concerned them prior to their placement commencing, with 62% of students (n = 23) feeling that they lacked confidence. 54% (n=20) were anxious about saying or doing the wrong thing and being in unknown territory. These figures indicate that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

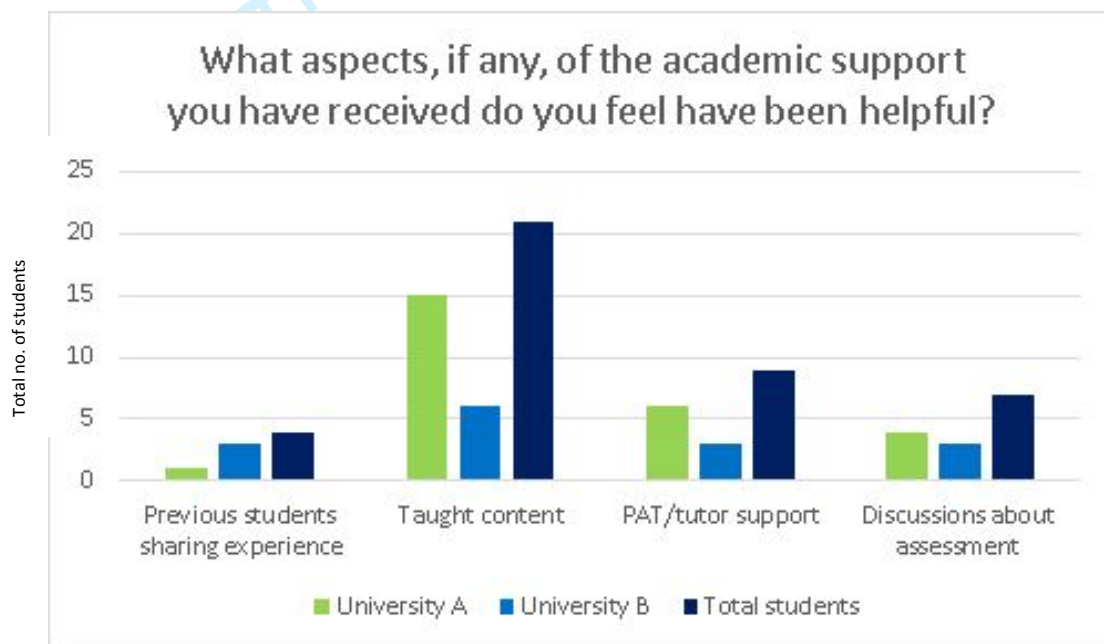


Fig. 2 above indicates that students, prior to go on placement, found the taught content most helpful overall, with 58% (n=21) feeling that the taught sessions were most useful. There was a notable difference however in the responses from the individual institutions, with University A students finding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

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“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

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3 respondents also valued the sharing of knowledge and experience from previous students. Many
4 referred to lecture and seminar content being useful holistically, however, there were some responses
5 which demonstrated a level of reflection about particular knowledge upon the experience, with one
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10 University A student reporting that:

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12 *“The safeguarding information was important for preparing for placement however I do not*
13 *feel that you can be particularly prepared for placement. You have to experience it”*
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17 This indicates that students value a range of preparation approaches and that there is no one uniform
18 approach, instead a variety of approaches were seen as beneficial with a view to giving the
19 opportunity for reflection and self-direction.
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24 When asked what additional support they would find useful, 44% (n=8) of respondents stated that
25 they did not feel they needed anything further, indicating that they were content with the levels of
26 support provided. The remaining 56% (n=10) who responded to this question gave a variety of
27 suggestions on how improvements could be made with more lectures (n=4), more support with the
28 assignment (n=2), and more organisational support (n=4) being the points proposed. This highlights
29 the requirement for more guidance from lecturers rather than peers, who were considered useful in
30 earlier responses.
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39 Finally, students were asked to consider how they felt when their placement experience had ended.

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41 Thematic analysis of responses from both Universities revealed 33% of University A respondents and
42 8% of University B respondents felt that they had been able to consolidate knowledge and gain
43 valuable experience, with one student from University B saying *“I felt like I had learnt a lot and*
44 *managed to put theory that I had learnt in lectures into practice”*. Feelings of sadness or reluctance
45 to leave the setting were common, with 60% of University A respondents and 66% of University B
46 respondents feeling this. However, for some students, these feelings of sadness at leaving were
47 supported with statements such as feeling *“pleased as I got a job after it! It was an amazing*
48 *experience and I'm glad I get to go back”*. All responses were positive in nature and highlighted that
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3 placement was an enjoyable and valuable aspect of the degree course. Students saw the benefits of
4 this experience and, on reflection, felt it to be worthwhile for both learning and skill enhancement.
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8 9 **Discussion**

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11 The confidence that students felt was explored prior to placement, and after it had concluded. Te
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13 Wiata (2001) argues that confidence supports students to demonstrate more generic skills within the
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15 workplace. Interestingly, the main barriers that participants reported that meant they did not feel
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17 confident prior to placement were reasons such as fear of the unknown and saying and doing the
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19 wrong thing. Anxiety on entering a new placement experience is a familiar emotion (Beck, 1992),
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21 even for the most experienced practitioner.
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27 It is widely understood that practical experience allows students to learn aspects of professions which
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29 cannot be learnt in the university environment (Rouse, Morrissey and Rahimi, 2012), those same
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31 aspects that students reported as barriers to their confidence levels. This therefore provides evidence
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33 for the argument of the value of placement opportunities within a degree course, reinforcing the ideas
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35 of McMillian (2009) who argues that combining theory and practice is essential within early years
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37 professionalism. Student responses in this research study parallel those found by McFarland *et al.*
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39 (2008), citing that practical experience in the field allows students to consolidate their knowledge, by
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41 seeing and experiencing it first-hand.
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46 Both cohorts felt the need for more preparation around assignments and this was a factor that was a
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48 cause for concern for both groups. This was also a recurring factor on their return from placement,
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50 significant perhaps when self-management is a key skill which Bridges (1993) argues is developed
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52 throughout a placement experience. The participants from University B appeared to feel relief at the
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54 completion of their placement due to the fact their assignment was a large task that needed
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56 undertaking. This stress impacts on the experience for the students and is a concern to them before,
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58 during and after the placement. Interestingly, preliminary research by Dey, Lindsay and Thomson
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60 (2017) found that students who completed placement experience without summative assessment

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3 attached did not feel this pressure, instead embracing the opportunity to develop skills before a
4 placement with assessment. Within University B, there are 40 credits associated to this module, which
5 may account for why this cohort felt more strongly than University A (where there are only 20 credits
6 associated to the module). In both cases, there is no space to arrange a pre-assessment placement such
7 as that mentioned above. However, students are required to attend an 'induction interview' where they
8 have the opportunity to visit the setting, and meet staff and discuss expectations from all avenues,
9 which may go some way to reducing the pressure felt by students.
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20 When reflecting after the placement experience, both cohorts reported that they were actually better
21 prepared than they originally perceived. Again, this can be linked back to the idea of building
22 confidence amongst students. Having confidence can support the abilities to demonstrate knowledge
23 within assessments; whilst also supporting the development of professional relationships during the
24 placement experience (Thompson, 2016). Findings showed that building relationships were important
25 to the students.
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33 When considering the research by Finch *et al.* (2013), which stated employers are looking for soft
34 skills, problem-solving skills, pre-graduate experience, some functional skills and academic
35 reputation, it can be noted that the majority of these skills are those which can be gained in a work-
36 based placement. It is argued that for these skills to fully flourish that students need the confidence in
37 order to allow this to occur. This is an area that requires further consideration.
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44 The students reported feeling sad that placement was complete due to the fact that they would miss
45 the children and practitioners that they had formed relationships with. This, alongside the fact that
46 some of the most helpful aspects of the preparation for placement came from peer mentors, personal
47 tutors and lecturers, shows the importance that students place on relationships, reinforcing findings
48 from Price *et al.* (2011). It can be argued, based on this small-scale research study, that these
49 relationships are what help to develop the confidence and the aspects that, as discussed above, cannot
50 be taught in an academic context. Reid (2016) has asserted that the relationship between tutors and
51 students has been de-professionalised with a focus on accountability and social efficiency of late, and
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3 although in this research, findings indicate the value of this relationship, both institutions are careful
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5 to maintain the appropriate levels of professionalism related to this.
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8 9 *Implications for future teaching and learning strategies*

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11 From this small-scale research project, both Higher Education (HE) institutions have identified areas
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13 for development in terms of learning and teaching strategies to support their first-time placement
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15 students. With the Teaching Excellence Framework (HEFCE, 2017) in operation, and recognising
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17 excellence in teaching and learning at HE institutions, it is more important than ever that institutions
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19 are rigorously evaluating and improving provision for students.
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23 Both institutions engaged in individual analysis in order to highlight key areas for development in
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25 teaching and learning strategies used. For University A, the priority has been to create ‘case studies’
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27 which highlight both student and setting perceptions of the placement experience. These case studies
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29 explore professionalism, employability and key skills which were identified by students within the
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31 research, and will be used as a tool of reflection for future students studying on the module. The case
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33 studies are also taking an element of student support which was reported as useful by students at the
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35 other university in the study, thus sharing worthwhile practice. Initial feedback regarding these case
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37 studies has been received, with prospective students choosing to engage with this to support their own
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39 confidence. University B is opting to further develop strategies already in place, namely student
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41 mentor support and the use of video tutorials. Learning from more experienced peers was recognised
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43 as a valuable support, and as an accessible resource with little cost, is an effective one to continue to
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45 develop. University B has also reduced the credit value of the placement to reduce the pressure that
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47 the assignment appears to generate.
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52 Although the literature review of this paper presented the case for the explicit knowledge to be
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54 generated within the classroom environment and the tacit knowledge being generated from the
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56 placement, it is argued that, as a result of this study, that this should be taken one step further. What
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58 is argued is that this tacit and explicit knowledge should converge, with the university environment
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3 becoming more explicitly responsible for the skills element and including these “skills sessions”
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5 within the placement preparation schedule. If the institutions support the knowledge gained with the
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7 skills sessions then, it is argued, that this will result in students having more confidence in their
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9 abilities before the commencement of placement experience. This should then result in a much more
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11 positive experience form both the student’s and the setting’s perspective.
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14 15 16 ***Limitations of the study***

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18 It is obviously not possible to generalise the findings from this study due to the small scale of the
19
20 research (Yin, 2014), however the results can be used to aid reflection on a wider scale. A point
21
22 worth noting is that the students from each university were at different levels of their studies.
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25 University A students were in their second year of study, compared to University B being in their first
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27 year of study. It could be argued therefore that these students were not comparable as they were at
28
29 different levels academically. However, both groups of students were experiencing an undergraduate
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31 placement experience for the first time and this is what was essential for the nature of this study, as it
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33 is the effectiveness of teaching and learning, and placement preparation which was explored.
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36 Another limitation of this study is that it is not possible to identify if the same students completed
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38 both questionnaires. It may be that a different set of students answered the first questionnaire to those
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40 who completed the second set and fewer students responded to the second questionnaire. It is likely
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42 that the number of responses to questionnaire 2 were lower due to the timing of the questionnaire
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44 release and this is something to consider should a similar study be undertaken in the future. It is
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46 hoped that the students who did respond are representative of the whole group and, although
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48 generalisations cannot be made to the wider academic world, it is assumed that these responses can be
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50 used for a generalisation in the case study settings. In any instance, we can be sure that all students
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52 from each institution who responded have experienced identical academic support, and this may go
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54 some way to overcoming this limitation.
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59 **Conclusion**

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3 In summary, this small-scale research paper has studied two cohorts of undergraduate Early
4 Childhood Studies students from two universities who have differing ways of delivering workplace
5 experience modules. Whilst both universities recognise the importance of ensuring students are
6 adequately prepared, they prepare students in different ways.
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12 Students were invited to answer questionnaires, considering their confidence levels and how prepared
13 they felt prior to starting their placement. The same cohort of students were then invited to take part in
14 a questionnaire afterwards, reflecting on their feelings upon their return. We found that students were
15 more prepared than they initially felt they were, and that a lack of confidence they felt prior to
16 placement derived from a fear of the unknown. Analysis of our findings also indicated that tutor
17 support and peer support were the most valuable preparation tools, thus contributing to their
18 confidence levels. As a result of these findings it is argued that the tacit knowledge should be
19 enhanced further within the lecture environment, giving students the skills required alongside the
20 traditional explicit knowledge. Further research is needed to assess the impact of such preparation
21 methods in order to continually inform high quality teaching and learning at these universities within
22 the associated modules.
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38 **Word count 6442**

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