

ICEST 2021**II International Conference on Economic and Social Trends for Sustainability of Modern Society****PROBLEMS IN THE ORGANIZATION OF STUDENT
PRACTICAL WORK PLACEMENT: STAKEHOLDERS'
VIEWPOINTS**

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Abstract

This paper reviews the current situation of the organization of students' practical work placement as an educational component that ensures the improvement of training quality in terms of the formation of practical skills and further employment of graduates in Russia. Work placement is considered here from the viewpoints of two main stakeholders: the university and employers. This work contributes to the existing body of literature and knowledge concerning university-employer cooperation and outlines directions for improving the efficiency of practical work placement. The methods chosen for the research on the current issues and perspectives of the cooperation are as follows: analysis of documents, literature review, survey of organizations, interviews with stakeholders, focus group discussions with representatives of host organizations, university administration and the faculty. Data on the current state of affairs in the field of organization of industrial practice at the university and host companies are collected. The problems of preparing, conducting, supporting and evaluating the results of practical work placement have been identified, and the needs for improvement in the following areas have been revealed: documentation and organizational support of practice at the university; forms of work with students during practice in companies; university-company interaction.

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Keywords: Higher education, student practical work placement, university-company interaction



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1. Introduction

In the framework of market relations, higher education simultaneously contains double pressure of the interests and requirements of the subjects of both - the market of educational services and labour market. On the one hand, universities provide educational services to society, with students as their direct consumers. On the other part, in the labor market, they present the results of their activities – new professionals who master certain educational programmes, with enterprises and organizations of various sectors of the economy in the roles of direct consumers as well. Investigating the needs and trends of the labour market allows universities to determine the main educational quality standards, as well as to diagnose changes in demand for certain professionals. In the long run, the availability of employment prospects after graduation is becoming an important factor for an individual's choice of educational products.

One of the main reasons for the difficulties of young professionals' employment is the existing gap between the educational system and the actual needs of the labour market, which became visible through the following findings:

- firstly, today's university graduates are not always sufficiently prepared for practical work. They need additional time to adapt, which in turn reduces their productivity and the competitiveness of the company or organization they start working in;
- secondly, lack of close systemic links between a university and a real sector of the economy leads to a structural imbalance in this area, when certain regions require specific workers, but regional universities offer different graduates.

As a result, organizations are experiencing a shortage of qualified personnel, and young professionals have difficulties finding work in their specialty. One of the solutions to this problem is development of new forms of interaction and cooperation between higher education institutions and enterprises, which will lead to modernization of educational process in the light of requirements of the labour market, and increase in efficiency of the education process as such.

The main forms of interaction between universities and organizations include (Ulina et al., 2019):

- participation of employers in the development of study programmes and curricula;
- targeted training of professionals at the request of companies;
- teacher training;
- using the human, material, scientific and technical potential of organizations in the educational process, including for creation of industrial chairs in HEIs;
- conducting joint research and implementing innovative projects;
- organization of effective students' practical work placement and diploma project development on the basis of partner organizations.

This paper focuses on one of the forms of such interaction, that is students' practical work placement in companies and organizations.

2. Problem Statement

Students' practical work placements are performed in accordance with the provisions of the Russian federal legislation, and the orders of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, and are an integral part of the educational process in accordance with the federal standards of higher education of the Russian Federation for bachelor's, master's, and specialist's degrees. Practical work placement, during which the student get acquainted with real production, technological processes, company structures and corporate cultures, economic activities and documentation is a traditional way of interaction between universities and enterprises.

This partnership scheme is beneficial for businesses, universities, and students. Enterprises that accept students for practical training have the opportunity to observe non-certified employees in work. The fact remains that employers often avoid taking inexperienced graduates directly to the regular staff, for fear of getting a "pig in a poke", and this kind of interaction is a worthy option for them. During work placement, students can have a closer look at the working conditions and test their own skills. At the same time, company managers and supervisors observe the work of a would-be specialist, and decide whether this student is suitable for them as an employee after graduating.

However, often employers are reluctant to take trainees, or do not provide them with enough information and opportunities to perform the tasks. In such a way, the results of the practice do not fully correspond to the set educational tasks (the required skills/ competencies could not be formed, or formed in an inadequate degree).

3. Research Questions

- How is students' practical work placements regulated and organized by the university?
- How is students' practical work placements carried out in companies?
- How is the university - host company interaction on the issues of students' practical work placements carried out?

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study is to identify the peculiarities and problems in the organization and management of student practical work placement in the companies/ organizations and at the university, namely Siberian Federal University, Krasnoyarsk, Russian Federation.

5. Research Methods

The research that served as the basis for the paper was carried out by the project team of the Siberian Federal University, the largest institution of higher education in the Krasnoyarsk territory within the framework of the ERASMUS+ UniLab project "From university to labour market in the 21st century: a step forward in work-based placements". Research methods chosen are as follows: analysis of documents, literature review, survey of organizations, interviews with stakeholders, focus group discussions with representatives of enterprises, university administration and the faculty.

5.1. Literature review

To evaluate the situation regarding the organization of student practical work placement, an analysis of current Russian and foreign publications on this topic was carried out, the forms and specifics of partnership relations between universities and companies in the implementation of the practical work placement were identified and discussed, and the existing problems were grouped. The results of the literature review on the research topic served as the basis for the formation of the content of the subsequent research methods.

5.2. Survey of companies in the Krasnoyarsk territory

The survey of companies in the Krasnoyarsk territory was developed and implemented in February-March 2020. For the first stage of the study, the SibFU project team worked out an online questionnaire consisting of 27 questions with the requirement to identify the respondents.

To determine the relevant group of respondents, the OKVED classification (Russian National Classifier of Types of Economic Activity) was used: the companies selected for the survey represented all the sectors of the regional economy. Most of the respondents – 46 per cent - were large enterprises. Industrial enterprises, including energy companies made 37 per cent, and 38 per cent organizations belonged to the service sector, including education, media, advertising business, IT firms, and consulting companies, etc., 17 per cent of enterprises represented construction industry. In total, the structure of respondents corresponded to the structure of the economy of the Krasnoyarsk territory. From there, the sample was fairly representative in terms of industry representation and company size. More than 100 respondents were interviewed – managers and specialists of companies in the Krasnoyarsk territory involved in the process of conducting student practical work placement.

5.3. Analysis of federal and local normative documents regulating student practical work placement

In the study, a number of federal and local normative documents regulating organization and provision of student practical work placement were considered and reviewed. They are:

- the Federal Law “On Education in the Russian Federation” dated 29.12.2012, Federal Act No 273;
- Federal State Educational Standards for Higher Education;
- main educational programmes of Siberian Federal University (SibFU);
- Regulations on Student Practical Work Placement in Siberian Federal University (SibFU);
- Associate Agreement between SibFU and (company/ organization);
- Standard-term contract on traineeship;
- Ordering for practical work placement (Supplement to the contract);
- Work programme of the student practical work placement.

5.4. Interviews with representatives of companies/ organizations

A number of structured interviews were conducted with the interested representatives of the companies that employed students for practical work, with the purpose of clarifying the peculiarities and problems in the organization of student placements. In the capacity of respondents, we invited chief executives of ten companies from different sectors - production, construction, IT, culture, public administration, and different size - small, medium and large organizations.

5.5. Interviews with University faculty responsible for organizing student practical work placement

Representatives of a number of SibFU institutes involved in the organisation, management and administration of student practical work placements were interviewed to describe the formats and identify the current problems. The survey was conducted remotely in the form of a formalized video interviews.

5.6. Focus group discussion with the participation of companies' representatives, business community, university staff, students and graduates

To develop proposals for improving the organization and management of student work practical placement and further employment of fresh graduates, a discussion on the current situation, needs and challenges in the format of a focus group was held with employers and university representatives, including students. The focus group discussion became a part of the conference. From the university to the labor market in the 21st century: mechanisms of interaction of participants (Šljivić et al., 2017).

6. Findings

The whole complex of the conducted research gave a clear picture of the current state in the organization and management of student work practical placement in Siberian Federal University. Praiseworthy aspects and shortcomings, as well as the stakeholders' needs and requirements served as a basis for improvement and further development.

6.1. Results of the review of publications on the issues of practical work placement

Questions on organization, management and administration of student practical work placement have been widely discussed recently in Russian and international contexts (Kuzminov & Frumin, 2018; Ulina et al., 2019). Among others, these issues, as well as problems of student pre-graduation practical training (majors "Economics" and "Management") are explored in the article by Chmyr et al. (2017), which summarizes the shortcomings of the organization of practical training in Russian and Chinese universities. In particular, the article highlights such problems as an imperfect system of teaching students during practice, lack of practical experience among faculty, and lack of effective bases for student placements inside and outside educational institutions.

Guremina et al. (2016) in their study come to the conclusion about the need for introduction of university tutorial support for students during work placement.

Awasthy et al. (2020), speculate about different types of university – business communication and motivation in terms of improving the quality of interaction.

Some scholars – Ivascu et al. (2015) claim that universities and employers operate in different (opposite) organizational cultures, which hinders the transfer of knowledge.

Breznitz and Feldman (2010) analyze various schemes of university – business partnerships and conclude that all of them are primarily based on the real economic concerns of the parties.

In the paper “Making Industry-University Partnerships Work”, Santoro and Betts, (2002) state that companies and organizations are reluctant to hire students for practical placements and do not provide them with enough information for fear of information leaks, technological and financial in nature.

Many world universities like the University of Banja Luka in their “Practical placement program” (2011) indicate the advantages that employers and universities receive due to close cooperation for the organization of students’ practical training.

Review of publications made a significant contribution to understanding a big world picture of the problems related to the organization and management of student practical work placements. The publications show that the questions of student practical training are not unique either for SibFU or for universities of the Russian Federation in general, they are the issues of global concern. The ideas and proposals considered in the publications should be discussed and applied to many regional and local solutions.

6.2. Evaluation of the organization of students ' practical training at the university

On the part of the university, a high level of regulation of students’ practice was revealed: the existing regulatory documents in all areas of training define the goals, content and requirements for the results of practical training; development of competencies and educational outcomes is fixed.

The analysis revealed the following shortcomings in the content of existing documents:

- other forms of practice other than full-time practice are not regulated;
- requirements for the content of the students’ activities during the internship are insufficiently presented;
- regulation of regular feedback during the internship needs to be improved;
- criteria for assessing the level of competences development are not developed;
- the structure and content of the practice report do not reflect the achievement of educational results;
- the format of the characteristics from the organization and the university supervisor’s feedback do not reflect the achievement of educational results;
- the conventional Agreement on student practical placement does not appoint individuals in charge, i.g., a university supervisor and the company mentor.

Each student is officially assigned a supervisor from the staff of the department that implements the educational programme. The data obtained by students during practical work is used for their research work, course projects and diploma papers. It is important to emphasize that approaches to practical work

placement differ significantly depending on the major. In some institutes, especially those with industrial specifics (for example, the Institute of Oil and Gas), almost 100 % of students get their placements in accordance with long-term university contracts with companies, whereas the staff and students from the departments of economics, humanitarian and social disciplines often search for practical placements by themselves, individually, by means of personal contacts and liaisons. In the latter case, the graduating departments just coordinate and document the student's/ supervisor's choice in accordance with the formal requirements.

6.3. Evaluation of the organization of student practical work placement in host companies/ organizations

Survey of employers highlighted their strong interest in hiring students to practical work placements: most companies surveyed - 91 per cent of large companies and 75 per cent of small and medium enterprises - currently provide placements for practical work to students of various majors. Along with that, 48.5 per cent of respondents are ready to employ more students on practical work than they currently do. It is worth mentioning that according to study findings, 73 per cent of companies have good experience in further employing young graduates - their former trainees.

In addition to recruiting new employees, organizations' concernment is often related to their development: a great many of respondents (63.6 per cent) believe that students bring new interesting ideas to the company atmosphere.

At the same time, the study identified a number of problematic areas in host organizations which affected the decline in the effectiveness of the students' practical work.

6.3.1. Organizational approaches to student practical work placement in host companies/ organizations

The first area is related to the organizational approaches to student practical work placement. Only few organizations, mainly large companies, have a structural unit that supervises the trainee's practical work. Most companies (63%) appoint a person to the position of a mentor, but job description of this person may not include mentoring, and even if it does, this function is not of higher priority.

Half of the organizations surveyed do not have documents regulating student practice. First of all, these are organizations of small and medium-sized businesses of various industry affiliations. Large organizations may have such papers, but often not regulating the process and content of the practical placement, but they are initiating (authorizing) documents such as orders to assign a person responsible for practice and administrative enrolment orders. Most organizations lack formalized procedures for evaluating students' performances, as well as mechanisms for feedback from the university.

The study also revealed a number of contradictions in the evaluation of the readiness of companies/ organizations to conduct effective placements: in this connection, 82 per cent of companies believe that their availability for placement provision can be considered as high. 75 per cent of respondents likewise believe that the company's specialists (mentors) responsible for placement do not need additional training to work with students – trainees, since they argue that are already sufficiently competent. At the same time, students and the university supervisors note common insufficient concern to student placement on the part

of companies, an existing arm’s length principle, as well as unreadiness of mentors responsible for placement.

6.3.2. Types of student practical work placements in companies/ organizations

The types of placements available to students can take many different forms. Meanwhile, the prevailing type offered to students is passive practical work, mainly observation. This type is the safest and easiest for employers, which is reflected in Figure 1. Another popular type is so-called “performing current operations as an assistant”, this fact was fixed in 60 per cent of student records.

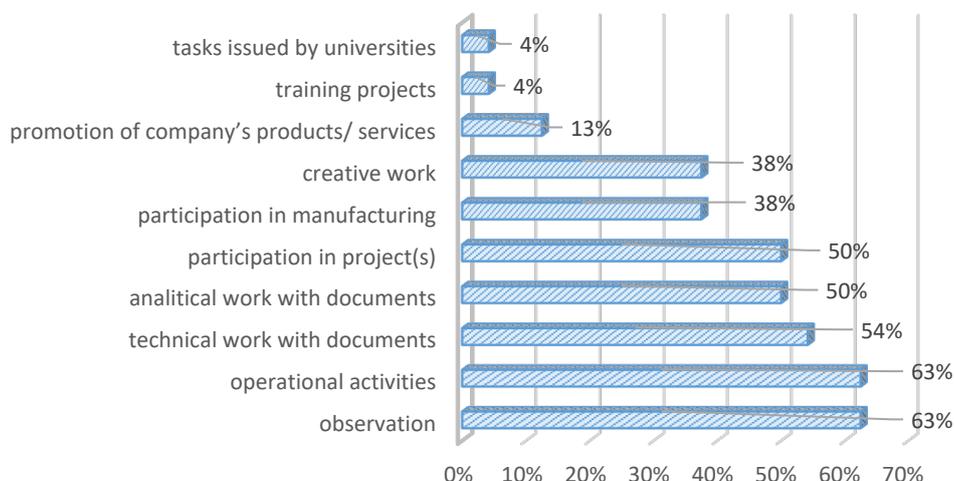


Figure 1. Types of student placements in companies/ organizations

As for the strategies used by companies for achieving the aims and objectives of student practical work placements, they tend to choose traditional approaches: counseling (96 per cent), technological advising (74 per cent), and professional consultations (61 per cent). Much less often, new strategies are applied such as special trainings and inclusion in working groups.

6.3.3. Interaction between the university and companies/ organizations on the issues of student practical work placements

The findings of the study signalize some vagueness of the mechanisms of interaction and the multiplicity of university - company touchpoints. To the question “Who does your company interact with in the educational institution on the student placements issues?” respondents noted liaison with Career centers, Directors of institutes, but the most frequent interaction mentioned was through contacts with university departments, and personal communications with university faculty, as shown in Figure 2.

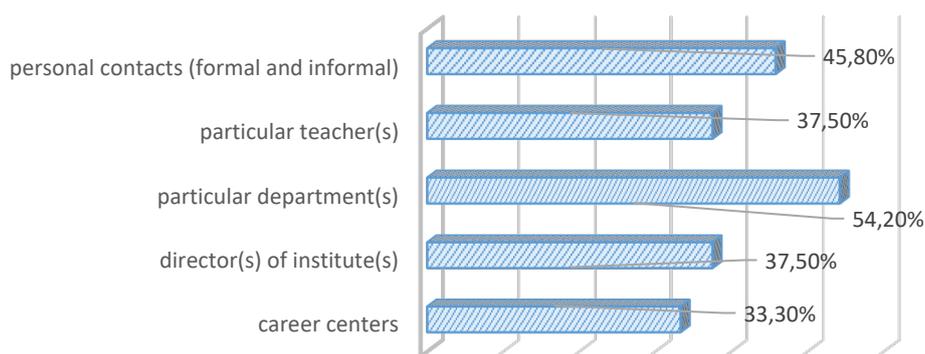


Figure 2. University – company interaction channels on the issues of student practical work placements

The research findings point out that all the actors involved in the provision of student work placement (university – employer – student) are interested in improving organization and content of this important stage of the educational process for the sake of quality of training and further employment of graduates. Figure 3 gives answers to the question about possible ways for improvement the effectiveness of the practical work placement.

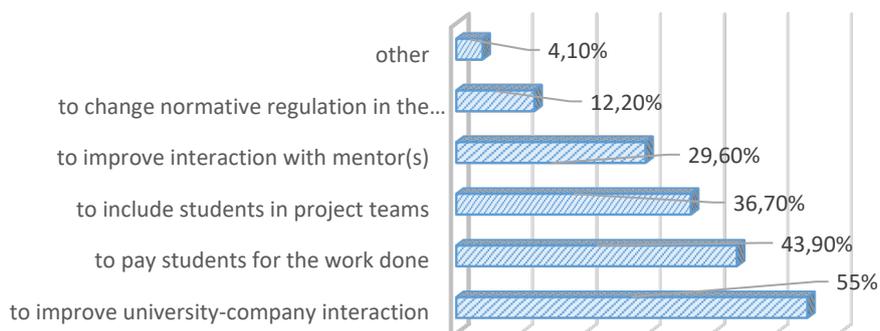


Figure 3. Directions for improvement the effectiveness of student practical work placement

More than half of the respondents (55 per cent) note that enhancement of interaction between the company and the university would lead to the effectiveness of students' placements.

7. Conclusion

Taken together, several lines of evidence reveal a number of peculiarities in the current organisation, management and administration of student practical work placement. The research identify the key approaches to the organization of student practice that need to be improved. They are:

- documentation support of the practical work placements by the university;
- organizational support of the practical work placements by the university;
- types of placement in companies/ organizations;
- interaction between the university and companies/ organizations.

The study indicates that determined effort is needed for improvement the effectiveness of practical placement as an integral element of modern professional training, linking the educational process and the requirements of the today's labor market. In this context, this effort should not be limited by the university's responsibility only, but be made primarily through the joint coordinated actions of universities and companies/ organizations.

Acknowledgments

The paper has been written as part of the implementation of the UniLab (UNIversity-LABor market) ERASMUS+ project "From university to labor market in the 21st Century: a step forward in work-based placements" 6102245-EPP-1-2019-1-BE-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP, Grant Agreement number 2019 – 2090 / 001 – 001 funded by the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) of the European Commission (Brussels).

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