The University of Manchester

Maximising academic potential by optimising support for students returning to university following industrial placement & interruption
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Background to study

Undergraduates are encouraged to develop their employability by seeking work experience. A yearlong placement between years 2 and 3 is one available option. For most the return to study in year 3 is a smooth transition but others find the return more challenging. Those students taking a period of unplanned interruption for health or financial reasons may also have concerns about returning to study. If not addressed, these concerns could impact upon the student experience and the ability of these students to reach their academic potential.

Aims of the study

- ❑ To establish the key concerns students experience before and after their return to university.
- ❑ Long-term goal: to design a support package for students (and staff) to ensure a smooth return to study.

Methodology

- ❑ Initial study conducted in academic year 2014-2015.
- ❑ Study was approved by The University of Manchester Research Ethics Committee.
- ❑ Four cohorts of students invited to participate:
  1. currently on placement (131 students)
  2. returned from placement (121 students)
  3. currently on interruption (43 students)
  4. returned from interruption (19 students)
- ❑ Students in groups 1-3 were asked to complete an online questionnaire.
- ❑ Students returned from interruption were invited to a 1:1 interview.

1. Findings from students on placement (Fig. 1)

- ❑ 87% of placement students expressed that they had concerns about returning to Manchester.
- ❑ Key concerns related to study skills and establishing new peer groups (Fig. 1).
- ❑ One student remarked they were apprehensive about *"getting back into the mind set of lecture writing, essay writing, revision, etc."*
- ❑ Also concern that subject knowledge gained during the first two years may be lacking:
  "trying to remember everything I learned before a year away. I feel like I've forgotten a lot of module content".
  "[I am] worried that the gap will mean I've forgotten lots from the first two years".

On placement   **Returned from placement**
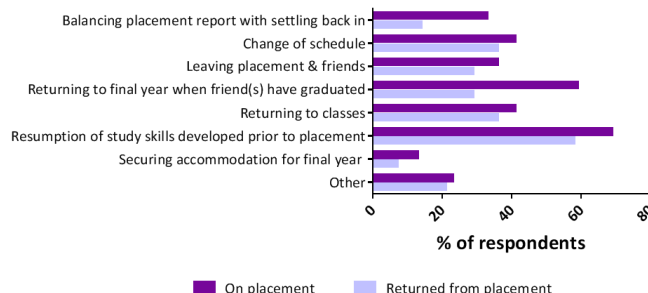
Figure 1: *Concerns raised by students on placement schemes. Students both on placement (n=39) and returned (n=14) from placement were asked what their key concerns were prior to their return to the final year of their studies.*

2. Students returned from placement (Fig.2)

- ❑ A similar pattern was observed with the main concern prior to the return to Manchester relating to the resumption of study skills (Fig. 1).
- ❑ In Figure 2, over a third of students (36%) found adjusting back to a university determined schedule was a challenge, including returning to lectures and tutorials.
- ❑ Students comments included that they had concerns about being:
  "out of practice for revision techniques"
  "out of academia and exams for a year made the January exams a concern"
- ❑ Many students thought their concerns were too trivial to discuss with a member of staff.
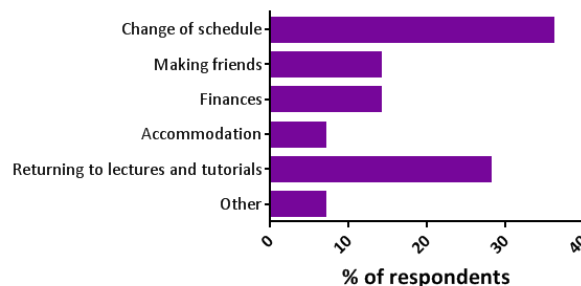
Figure 2. *Key challenges faced by students returned from a placement year. Students were questioned on the difficulties they faced upon their return to the final year of their studies (n=14).*

3. Students on interruption

- ❑ Similar concerns to placement students (Table 1), especially in relation to exam preparation.
- ❑ One student remarked: *"I wasn't sure how I was going to react back at uni(versity) again. I'd managed to be OK to work a full-time job for 3 months … but it was a bit different. There was no pressure of deadlines. I wasn't sure how I would get into it and it did take a lot longer than I thought. I still struggled studying for my exams, getting into the swing of things".*

Concerns prior to return from interruption	% of respondents
Reasons for interruption are still a concern	67
Reasons for interruption may recur	33
Unclear about what you need to do before your return	0
Securing accommodation for your return	67
Returning to studies when friend(s) may have proceeded to the next year	67
Returning to lectures and tutorials after a period of absence	33
Study skills may be inadequate to manage with the return to studying	33

Conclusions

- ❑ Both student groups expressed apprehension about their return to university.
- ❑ Similar issues affect both placement and interrupting students.
- ❑ Key concerns included:
  1. resumption of study skills developed prior to placements
  2. loss of friendship groups
  3. recommencement of an academic schedule

Plans for the future

- ❑ **Support package for both staff and students with the aim of assisting students in the re-orientation to the demands of academic study.**
- ❑ Online resources and/or workshops upon the students return.
- ❑ Proactive approach from academic staff to maintain contact with students, especially those interrupting their studies, will be adopted.