DRIVING CAREER ASPIRATIONS OR FINANCIAL NECESSITY: STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF WORK PLACEMENTS AND PART-TIME EMPLOYMENT WHILE IN FULL-TIME STUDY AT UNIVERSITY.

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The number of full-time undergraduate students engaged in part-time employment remains high (Endsleigh, 2012), with financial need as the primary motivator (Richardson et al, 2009). At the same time HEIs are increasingly aware of the need to support students' transition into employment, and as a consequence work placement schemes are commonplace. This creates a dynamic mix of activities among both students and universities, that transcend the traditional taught degree scenario. It particularly raises questions regarding students' perceptions of industrial placements against other part-time work opportunities, and how these drive individuals' career aspirations.

While 'placements' are seen as beneficial in developing students' personal qualities (Martin & McCabe, 2009) and transferable skills (Jackson, 2013), part-time employment is typically viewed negatively, particularly as detrimental to academic performance (Curtis & Shani, 2002). Yet, part-time work can help strengthen individuals' employment potential (Mansson & Ottosson, 2011) and provide adjustment to the world of work (Billet & Ovens, 2007). How these two activities interact and crystallise in the minds of students in order to support career aspirations remains unexplored.

The paper presents research findings regarding students' perceptions about their work placement and their respective part-time working activities. While Neil et al. (2004) examined the use of part-time work as preparation for placement, questions raised here are concerning whether placements fulfil students' needs in respect of money and career aspirations, or whether placements provide a short interlude to their studies, are examined. Moreover, how the two activities converge in the minds of students to drive and support career aspirations is also explored.

An online questionnaire comprising dichotomous, rating-scale and open-ended questions was issued to over 300 business students at two post-92 universities, who are currently on a work placement. A similar instrument was also issued to business students at both institutions, who had completed a work placement in the previous academic year and were now continuing their studies. The findings from the two sets of data are analysed and compared using data management software.

The findings will potentially influence HEIs strategies towards placements, as they aim to enhance the student experience and improve individuals' employability prospects. In addition, how HEIs can support individuals' career aspirations through placements and other workplace activities will be explored. Moreover, the work will contribute to existing academic studies in this field by converging placements and part-time working, both of which have been examined independently.