An evaluation of public policy student placements: outcomes of a Malta-based study

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to evaluate short-term, unpaid placements offered to students reading for a degree in public policy. They provide added value to their tertiary education experience. Elective placements were offered in 2012 and became a mandatory requirement for students reading for a three-year bachelor of commerce degree in public policy in 2018. To date, no research has been carried out on these placements and this may serve as a model for a post-evaluation assessment.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected from students who undertook placements, embedded in the public policy undergraduate programme. A document analysis of selected student and placement provider's reports was carried out to complement the students' responses on an online questionnaire.

Findings – Placements are of value to students as they served as an introduction to the working world. They enable students to establish connections with the course content and carry out research. They were exposed to real-life situations, developing their knowledge, acquiring soft skills and learning new tools, sought after by employers. These placements were valued as a route to graduate employment tailor-made to the degree's requirements. Students were able to embark on a soul-searching, introspective discovery and journey which made them mature and shed light in the direction of future work prospects.

Research limitations/implications – Placements give students the opportunity to gain insights into real-work environments and are able to link theories learnt in the class-room with real-life situations. Placements have positive implications on students adjusting to their work life easily after graduation. The limitations are that the sample size was small and that the reflective reports which were randomly selected may not have necessarily been representative of the full complement.

Practical implications – The practical implications are that the placements system and process can easily be implemented and replicated in other academic disciplines and universities as a compulsory component of their studies.

Social implications – Placements gave students the opportunity to reflect on their learning, develop non-technical skills and enhance their confidence levels. They were also able to network and communicate with different employees.

Originality/value – Placements provided exposure to relevant organisations and personal enrichment in terms of acquiring skills, autonomy and independence. Students with placement experience are also more likely to secure future employment, relevant to their undergraduate degree.

Keywords Value, Placement, Work-based learning, Experiential, Higher education

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Public policy graduands tend to encounter difficulties in obtaining graduate work in the early stages after successfully completing their degree. A placement experience is considered a critical component of the undergraduate programme because it enriches students' understanding of [any discipline including public policy] and "offers them the opportunity to explore and expand on theoretical concepts [. . .] in a real-life context and application" (Garnett, 2012). Placements positively contribute to the development of "a broad base of useful life-enhancing skills" (Helyer, 2015, p. 16) and provide a "head start" for graduates at the beginning of their careers (Wilton, 2012).

It is "believed that graduates who have undertaken a work placement as part of their undergraduate degree [in Public Policy] or have relevant work experience, adjust to work life more easily than those without work experience" (Education and Skills Committee, 2007, p. 135). Although university students may already have limited experience of working in the

labour market, this study found that they have not developed enough confidence in building working relationships. Edwards (2014)'s research claims that students reported "increased levels of confidence" after undergoing a placement (p. 237).

The breadth and depth of knowledge and expertise demonstrated by work-based learners confirms the value of work experience. "Students who just focus on their degree studies without spending time in the workplace are unlikely to develop the skills and interests that graduate employers are looking for" (Birchall, 2013).

Placement learning benefits students by gaining insight into real-work environments and business etiquette; learning from real-life work experience; making connections between their studies and the workplace; assessing their career and progression choices; forging networks with practitioners and developing technical and non-technical skills (Helyer and Lee, 2014). Employers are increasingly placing a greater emphasis on non-technical and social skills or attitudes such as adaptability, resilience, team-working and communication (Cunningham and Villasenor, 2014).

The purpose of this study is to examine whether public policy placements provide added value to tertiary education experience. Their intrinsic value will be assessed on whether there is agreement between the students, academic mentors and supervisors during placements. The study is based on Kolb's experiential theory and refers to Mant's plan-do-review cycle, designed as a framework to guide the involvement of students, academic mentors and supervisors during placements. This study emphasizes students' experiential learning. Placements provide students with the opportunities to engage in work, review this activity critically, draw some useful insight from the analysis and apply the result in a practical situation. This experience allows them to manage and share responsibility for their learning with the supervisors and develop important skills during a placement. It is intended to capture and present an account of selected, supervised work experiences to complement the findings and themes that emerge. Mant's plan-do-review incremental cycle is used as a conceptual framework for the placement process offered by institutions.

This paper is organised as follows: the next section outlines the literature relating to experiential learning and Mant's (1997) plan-do-review incremental change cycle. This is followed by providing the context to these placement offerings. The research design is explained, and the findings are presented and analysed. The discussion is grounded in the importance of placements offered to public policy students at the University of Malta and their added value as a route to graduate employment.

2. Literature review

Many universities offer and encourage student placements. Different terms are used to denote a placement such as work-based learning, internship, practicum and sandwich placement. Placements refer to students who "are physically based in a professional setting for a defined period" (Jackson, 2018, p. 556). They provide "valuable insights into professional ideology and practice . . . apply and [help students] develop discipline-specific and non-technical skills" (Jackson, 2016, p. 926). The key actors in a placement relationship are the students, employers and the university (Jones et al., 2017).

2.1 Experiential learning

Learning that takes place at work as part of development and problem-solving would be in response to pre-determined objectives. "The learning process for any skill requires the ability to move through the experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting cycle" (Kolb and Kolb, 2005, p. 205). Experiential learning theory is viewed as a process that best enhances students' learning and receives feedback on the effectiveness of their learning efforts. "Learning is a

holistic process of adaptation to the world. It results from assimilating new experiences into existing concepts and accommodating these to new experience. Learning is also the process of creating knowledge" (Kolb and Kolb, 2005, p. 194).
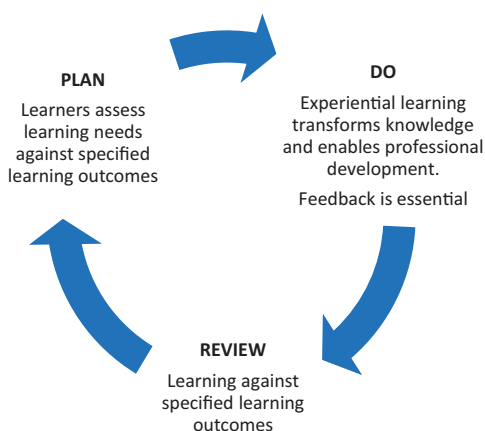
Billet (2011) emphasises that learning in the workplace is integrated with on-campus learning. This is so that students can make links between their learning in the different settings and better understand what is required for effective practice or targeted skills and knowledge. As a result, ". . . knowledge is [also] created through the transformation of a [placement] experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). The essential criterion for a placement activity as part of an academic programme is "its ability to form a vehicle for [subject-specific] learning . . ." (Lester and Costley, 2010, p. 563).

Formal placements have led to a pedagogical approach that consists of four main components namely: a programme consisting of a learning agreement; recognising previous learning before the start of a placement and the use of research and valid forms of assessment based on generic criteria. According to Anderson *et al*. (1998), "a formal agreement [or objectives] between learner and placement supervisor is prepared, what is to be learnt, the resources available, what will be produced as evidence of learning, and how it will be assessed" (p. 163).

The experiential and individual nature of workplace learning requires clear procedures and roles. The academic mentor together with the placement supervisor, facilitate the planning, work experience and review phases of the students' development. This combines the specific learning outcomes with professional and skills development. The process in placement experiences is cyclical and iterative as the placement supervisor provides information, works with students and academic mentors, to plan accordingly. This is underpinned in Mant's (1997)conceptual framework of the plan-do-review cycle.

2.2 Mant's conceptual framework

In this study, Mant's (1997)'s conceptual framework of plan-do-review incremental change cycle was used in the research design (Figure 1). It guides the stakeholders' involvement during students' placements, identifying objectives, validating students' learning and reviewing against any lessons learnt.

PLAN
Learners assess learning needs against specified learning outcomes

DO
Experiential learning transforms knowledge and enables professional development.
Feedback is essential

REVIEW
Learning against specified learning outcomes

Source(s): Richardson, Jackling, Henschke, Tempone, (2013)

Figure 1.
The placement experience as a plan-do-review cycle

2.2.1 Plan. Mant's model's first component involves alignment of learning outcomes with assessment. There are many studies that support this concept (Henderson and McWilliams, 2008). Academic mentors and placement supervisors collaboratively provide learning support and work with the student to set achievable goals for development. Learning objectives are determined by placement supervisors, academic mentors and the student (Jones, 2009). This ensured that goals were defined, and there was open communication and clear expectations.

2.2.2 Do. Feedback from the placement supervisor is essential to continually validate activities and maximise the students' learning. There is limited scholarly literature on how to frame placement supervisor's feedback. Feedback tends to focus on analysis rather than outcomes (McNamara, 2008). Placement supervisors appraise performance in a workplace which is not the same as that of an academic. Criteria are initially proposed and agreed to with the student which included the ability and willingness to learn, teamwork and cooperation, initiative, analytical thinking [. . .] quality and accuracy, and written communication skills (Zegwaard *et al.*, 2003).

2.2.3 Review. This phase builds "the knowledge for understanding and the reflective practitioner (Kolb, 1984). It consists of a review of change or learning in the workplace against learning outcomes agreed upon by all stakeholders in the planning phase (Richardson *et al.*, 2013). To delineate the learning goals, clear criteria need to be given to the students at the outset. The students would "reflect on their learning experiences and this would enable them to develop a sense of their own personal and professional development" (Stefani *et al.*, 2000, p. 163).

2.3 Impact and value
Evaluation of work-based programmes suggests that they provide "an effective vehicle for personal and professional growth." (Lester and Costley, 2010). Learners mention gaining expertise and specific skills, but what they seem to value most from placements include an "increased confidence, a propensity to reflect, to want to understand and a hunger for further learning and development" (Stephenson and Saxton, 2005; Costley and Stephenson, 2008; Nixon *et al.*, 2008).

Organisations are also impacted by work-based programmes. The value of the work-based project and the skills and changes it brings with it (Costley and Stephenson, 2008; Nixon *et al.*, 2008; Lester and Costley, 2010). Projects can result in knowledge creation, adding to its capability. Learners can also impact organisations by their professionalism and motivation (Lester and Costley, 2010). Work-based programmes can have a wider impact on bringing about organisational change to ways of working, identifying new directions or gaining external recognition (Lester and Costley, 2010).

The next section explains the context. Students at the University of Malta undergo their 50 h work-based placements during their academic year.

2.4 Context
In 2012, the department of public policy within the Faculty of Economics, Management and Accountancy (FEMA) University of Malta, introduced elective work placements for its public policy students. The main objectives of a student placement are to offer opportunities for practical experience in the application and usefulness of knowledge gained at the university; develop personal and transferable skills; further develop business skills and learn about the profession (University of Malta, 2020). The four criteria for a placement programme were a specific number of hours, paid or unpaid work, academic credit and supervision by a public policy academic (DiLorenzo-Aiss and Mathisen, 1996).

Between 2012 and 2017, many of the Bachelor of Commerce (Honours) Public Policy students in their fourth academic year, opted for a placement. In 2018, the Bachelor of Commerce (Honours) in Public Policy course was restructured from a four to a three-year degree in Public Policy in compliance with the Bologna process [nche.gov.mt, 2020]. The PPL3107 compulsory placements were embedded in the third year of undergraduate study as part of the Bachelor of Commerce degree in Public Policy. This is no longer an honours programme. The placements were short and predominantly local and integrated in the curriculum. They consisted of a 50-h, unpaid placement, awarded an academic credit of 6ECTS [1] and included in the students' degree transcripts.

The students were asked to identify an organisation of their choice and search for a suitable placement in either the public sector or service, private sector, non-governmental organisations or EU institutions. This was to encourage students to take the initiative and responsibility for their placement. Each organisation was approached by the academic coordinator/mentor and briefed on the possibilities of research-based work to be assigned to public policy students. Routine or menial activities were not to be included as part of these unpaid placements. "We recognise that a research-based approach provides students with short but powerful narratives, useful for personal development planning and job applications and interviews" (Knight and Yorke, 2004, pp. 94, 137–138). Objectives were agreed at the outset so that "the placement opportunities were negotiated with the providers to tie the placement activities as closely as possible to the specific learning outcomes of the Public Policy [study units]" (Curtis *et al.*, 2009). This approach ensured that the students engaged in worthwhile learning activities and developed their research skills and capabilities.

3. Research methodology
The focus of this research was to examine whether public policy placements added value to students' tertiary education experience.

Two research instruments – an online questionnaire and document analysis – were used to investigate the expectations, workload and supervision, overall experience, lessons learnt and learning outcomes of these student placements. These methods were deemed appropriate, as they enabled a detailed investigation and examination of the interpretation of the students during their social interactions (Silverman, 2013). Qualitative research tools are suitable for addressing enquiries that demand explorations of social reality within specific contexts (Snape and Spencer, 2003). A further aim was to triangulate the data to obtain feedback surrounding student placements.

The *online questionnaire* was devised and consisted of 39 questions. It was divided into three parts, namely: requesting basic information about the respondent, details about the public policy placement and overall experience and outcomes. Since 2012, there were 35 students enrolled on the public policy programme who all undertook either an elective or compulsory unpaid work placement. They were individually contacted and explained the purpose of the research. An information sheet was included at the start of the online questionnaire requesting their voluntary participation in the study. The participants were required to give consent before proceeding. This also confirmed that participants had access to the same information. The data were password protected to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

The respondents were asked to complete the online questionnaire. The responses were processed according to the University of Malta's ethical guidelines. The research took place between June and July 2020. These placements were held in the public sector, private sector, public service, EU institutions and non-governmental organisations. Online questionnaires can be administered in a time-efficient manner with low-administration costs. They are convenient for respondents to reply and their responses can be tabulated and analysed.

However, they tend to be impersonal and there may be concerns on how data will be used (Evans and Mathur, 2018).

Secondary data involved a *document analysis*. This is a "systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents and requires that data is to be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding and develop empirical knowledge" (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). The student and placement supervisors' placement reports were analysed for authenticity, credibility, representation and meaningfulness (Scott, 1990).

The document analysis of eight out of the 35 unpaid placement reports was randomly selected according to the four different sectors (Table 1). The reports gave various scenarios and reflections of the students' work-based experience and indicated any lessons that were learnt from this placement.

Placement supervisors' reports consisted of students' performance assessment. The reports submitted by the students consisted of their placement experience, reflections, skills and lessons learnt. These documents were submitted to the Department of Public Policy for academic assessment after the placement was carried out. Written permission was sought from the respondents to review their performance and reflections in these reports, maintaining anonymity and confidentiality. The data were accurately sourced to ensure correct representation. Although eight reports were randomly selected and analysed, they may not have necessarily been representative. There was the need to adopt a critical stance as some reports were not objectively written.

The analytical process of the qualitative data that was collated led to a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This is a method of identifying, sorting, analysing and reporting themes within the data. It offered a "rigorous, accessible, and theoretically-flexible approach" (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 77) to analyse qualitative data. It involved organising the data to elicit similar themes and patterns. There was an attempt to theorise the significance of the patterns, their broader meanings and implications in relation to the previous literature (Patton, 1990 quoted by Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 84).

The process in the thematic analysis entailed familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for similar themes, reviewing them and producing a report "(Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 87). The reflective reports submitted by the students after their

	Sector	Reflective placement reports	Year
1	Public sector (elective)	Respondent 31's reflective report on the placement held at the Malta Council for Science and Technology (MCST)	2012–2013
2	Public sector (elective)	Supervisor's report on respondent's 31's placement held at the Malta Council for Science and Technology (MCST)	2012–2013
3	Private sector (compulsory)	Respondent 18's reflective report on the placement held in a medium-sized bank	2018–2019
4	Private sector (compulsory)	Supervisor's report on respondent 18's placement held in medium-sized bank	2018–2019
5	Public service (compulsory)	Respondent 6's reflective report on the placement held at the Ministry for Finance	2018–2019
6	Public service (compulsory)	Supervisor's report on respondent 6's placement held at the Ministry for Finance	2018–2019
7	Non-profit organisation (compulsory)	Respondent 5's reflective report on the placement held at *Moviment Graffitti,* Core group	2019–2020
8	Non-profit organisation (compulsory)	Supervisor's report on respondent 5's placement held at *Moviment Graffitti*, Core group	2019–2020

Table 1.
Number of selected placement documents used for analysis

Source(s): Own compilation, 2020

placements were rigorously analysed. They were compared to the results of the questionnaires leading to four emerging themes discussed in the next section.

4. Findings
Thematic and qualitative findings on the added value of public policy placements were carried out. The findings emerged from the online questionnaire and the document analysis.
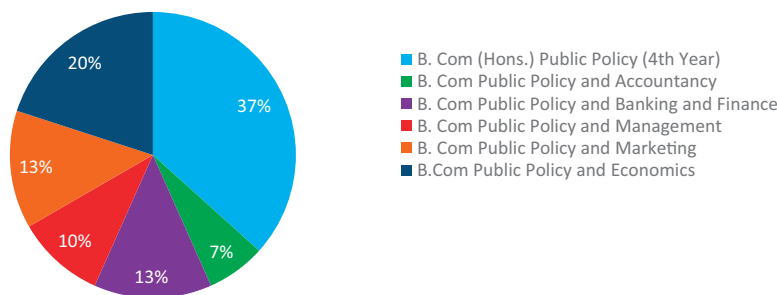
4.1 Online questionnaire
A total of 35 questionnaires were sent to students who had undertaken a placement between 2012 and 2020. This is the full complement of students who read for a Bachelor of Commerce in Public Policy during the past eight years. There was a 91% response rate (34 completed questionnaires). Only one respondent refused to give feedback claiming that *"he had an unpleasant placement experience which he preferred not to share"* (anonymous). The online questionnaire consisted of three parts requesting basic information about the respondent, details about the public policy placement and overall experience and outcomes.

4.1.1 Part 1. The sample consisted of thirty-five Maltese and one Finnish student. Only one student did not reply to the questionnaire. Respondents were aged between 21 and 26 years at the time of their placement (Figure 2).

In Figure 2, 37% of the respondents carried out their elective placement in year 4 between 2012 and 2017. A total of 63% of the respondents undertook a compulsory placement in their final year of study (year 3). The latter students selected public policy and another major. A total of 20% of students had majored in public policy and economics, followed by 13% who majored in public policy and banking and finance, and public policy and marketing, respectively. A total of 10% have read for public policy and management.

4.1.2 Part 2. The second part of the questionnaire focused on the public policy placement experience. The respondents were asked which sector they selected to carry out their placement. *"I participated in a sector that greatly interests me and had a choice over my placement environment"* (Respondent 5).

In Figure 3, 35% of the students carried out their placement in the public sector, followed by 29% in the public service. A total of 26% occurred in the private sector. Between 2012 and 2017, 77% of the sample carried out an elective policy placement. Various organisations were selected ranging from ministries, agencies, commissions, banks, audit firms, ICT organisations, foundations, private companies, telecommunication industry, stock exchange, European Parliament and NGOs. Prior to their placement, 45% of the respondents had worked in a related organisation.

- B. Com (Hons.) Public Policy (4th Year)
- B. Com Public Policy and Accountancy
- B. Com Public Policy and Banking and Finance
- B. Com Public Policy and Management
- B. Com Public Policy and Marketing
- B.Com Public Policy and Economics

Source(s): Own compilation, 2020

Figure 2.
Percentage of students according to the selected Bachelor of Commerce Majors who undertook a placement

4.1.3 Part 3. The questions in part 3 focused on the four themes that emerged from the findings of the questionnaire and affirmed by the document analysis. These included the following: (i) students' expectations, (ii) workload and supervision, (iii) overall experience (iv) lessons learnt and the learning outcomes of public policy placements.

(i) Expectations From the findings, it transpired that 96.8% of the respondents agreed that the objectives of the placement were clear and 82.1% knew what was expected of them during the public policy placement. Only 16.1% felt that they took long to orient themselves during the placement. *"Initially, I felt nervous, joining an organisation without knowing exactly what I would be doing. As time went by, I became accustomed to the work environment"* (Respondent 7). In effect, 93.6% agreed and strongly agreed that the placement met their expectations (Figure 4).

(ii) Workload and supervision Only 3.2% agreed that the workload was too heavy. A total of 67.8% agreed that the work was varied, although 32.3% revealed that there was little variation in the work carried out. A total of 90.4% stated that they were comfortable asking for advice or assistance during the placement, and 96.8% revealed that the work environment was conducive to their overall placement experience.

In Figure 5, 96.8% stated that there were flexible working hour arrangements which gave the respondents time to pursue other commitments. In fact, 77.4% of respondents stated that the placement did not interfere with part-time work, sports, or hobbies.

(iii) Overall experience The respondents stated that the placement gave new insights in how the workplace was run and managed. They found their placement colleagues

Figure 3.
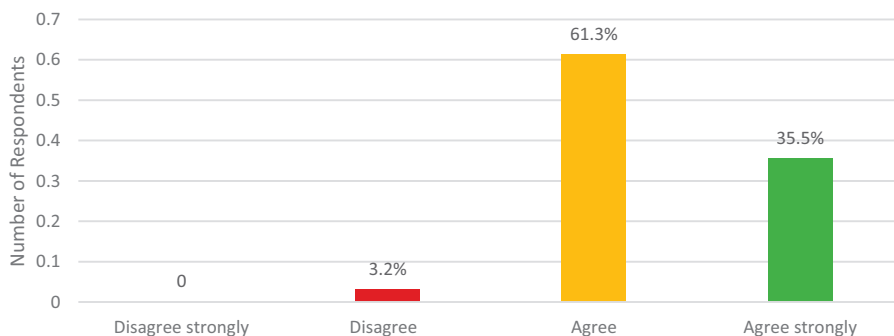Percentage of students who carried out their placements in different sectors
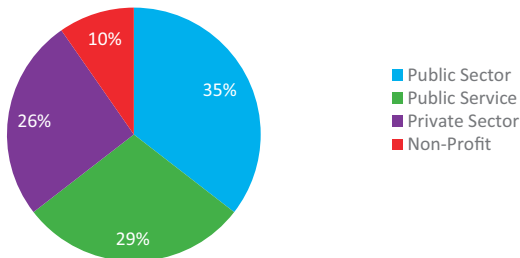
Source(s): Own compilation, 2020

Figure 4.
The percentage of students whose expectations of the placement were met
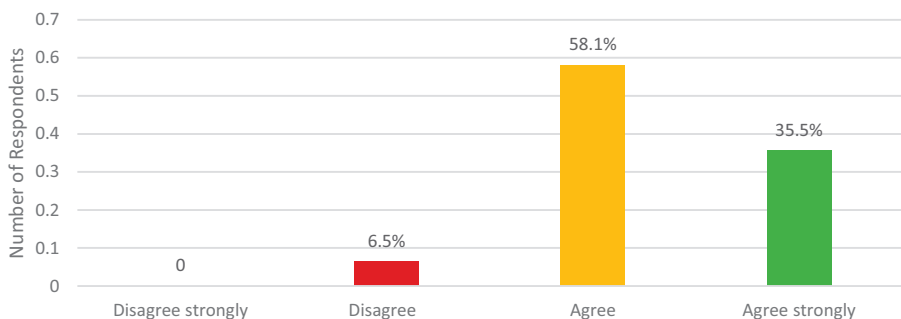
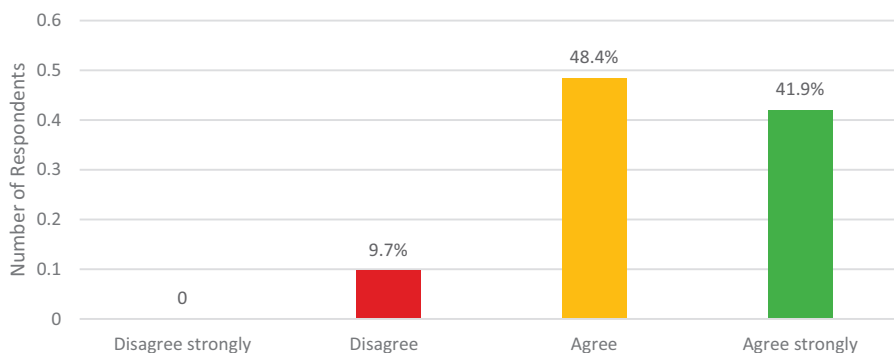**Source(s):** Own compilation, 2020

Source(s): Own compilation, 2020

friendly and approachable. They found their placement colleagues friendly and approachable. *"As someone who'd never held a job before, the experience was useful in learning how to get on with colleagues"* (Respondent 8).

In Figure 6, 90.3% of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the overall placement experience. The students reviewed their experience according to Mant's model.

(iv) Lessons learnt and learning outcomes Most of the respondents (97%) stated that the placement complemented what they understood by public policy, whereas 74.2% stated that they were able to apply their academic knowledge. A total of 96.7% of the respondents revealed that the placement provided them with learning opportunities as stated by Billet (2011). *"If I had not chosen the work placement as an elective, this would have been lacking in my learning and course curriculum"* (Respondent 23). The respondents stated that *"a mixture of skills was acquired as a result of their placement"* (Respondent 23). *"Research skills and communication skills, I would say, were the top two skills"* (Respondent 20).

In Figure 7, 77% stated that the placement was beneficial when seeking future, relevant employment. *"The work experience was related to my field of study and opened up an opportunity for part-time work within the same organisation"* (Respondent 25). *"It gave me the opportunity to learn what I was looking for in a*
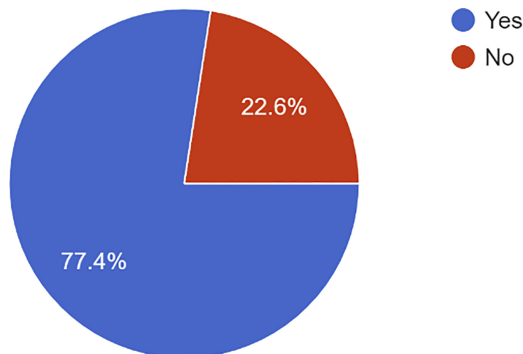
Source(s): Own compilation, 2020

Figure 7.
Percentage
composition – are
placements beneficial
for future employment?

Source(s): Own compilation, 2020

full-time job" (Respondent 10). This resonates with Kolb's theory of experiential learning.

The respondents were asked if they would include a placement if they were asked to redesign the course curriculum. There was almost unanimous agreement (97%) that stated that placements should be part of the curriculum. A total of 58% suggested that a placement experience should be offered in the third year. *"It gives students time to digest the theoretical aspect of public policy and allows them to perform better and more confidently during the placement"* (Respondent 5). A total of 39% of the respondents suggested that placements should be offered in the second of the Bachelor of Commerce in Public Policy curriculum.

4.2 Document analysis

To complement the findings and analysis from the online questionnaire, eight random reports were analysed. These were categorised into four different sectors, namely the public sector, private sector, public service and non-profit organisations. The reports consisted of students' reflections and experiences based on their placement in different sectors (Table 1). "Reflection is long established in work-based learning practice as a tool of enquiry" (Helyer and Lee, 2014, p. 353). The students were evaluated on their levels of understanding.

4.2.1 Public sector. Respondent 31 carried out an elective placement in the public sector – the Procurement Unit within the Malta Council for Science and Technology (MCST). This unit is responsible for the drafting, publication, administration and awarding of tender contracts. The objective of this placement was to prepare a brief of the legislation regulating public procurement in Malta; to prepare a timeline of a large tender which was approaching its closing date and to draft summaries on cases that were appealed noting the appellants' arguments, the issues involved and the process itself.

The work required attention to detail and the student reported that he found it difficult. MCST is a flat structure, manned by high level expertise. This gave the respondent the opportunity to learn the technical work and network with employees. It gave the student the opportunity to plan, do and review the work and experience according to Mant's conceptual framework. The placement supervisor admitted that the tasks and responsibilities were carried out by specialised employees and work could not be delegated. The short placement duration was also a contributing factor to this. The student also stated that on completion of course, an application for a job interview was submitted. The knowledge on public procurement was beneficial to employment prospects.

4.2.2 Private sector. Respondent number 18's compulsory placement was held in a medium-sized bank, strategy and marketing department under the supervision of the

Corporate Strategy Unit (CSU). The bank wanted to create a new framework for the revision of the bank's tariff of charges and carry out a benchmark analyses, prepare a presentation and carry out market research. This was delegated to the students who embraced the challenge. The placement supervisor stated that the student expressed an interest in planning, doing, learning and understood the concepts in a noticeably short period of time (Mant's model). He demonstrated a good work ethic *"which is very promising for a future career"* (placement supervisor).

Upon reflection, (according to Kolb's theory), students became aware of the differences and distinction between university life and the place of work (Respondents 18, 31). Relationships with staff were forged which led to feeling comfortable in a work environment. However, the placement revealed to a student that working individually is preferred. Academic knowledge on the policy environment, leadership and researching public policy were applied through this banking experience.

4.2.3 Public service. Respondent number 6's compulsory placement was held within the Ministry for Finance – Research Unit (Local Policy Section), Office of the Permanent secretary. The objective of the placement was to review the white paper entitled "Renting as a Housing Alternative (2018)" and provide policy recommendations on its feasibility. This placement was to test the student's policy review and analytical skills. The student utilised his academic knowledge in the theories of public policy used to develop this white paper and understand the actors and the policy environment. "*The knowledge learnt on-campus was closely linked and put into practice at work" (Respondent 6).*

The placement was an eye-opener for one of the respondents who stated that he is not a team player in order to manage his commitments and meet deadlines (Respondent 6). The respondent did emphasise the importance of communication skills to help strengthen relations with colleagues. In conclusion, the student's overall experience and learning outcomes (kolb's theory) were positive as *"I understood how policies are created in practice through discussion and observation."*

4.2.4 Non-profit organization. Respondent 5's compulsory placement was held in a non-profit organisation, *Moviment Graffitti*. Its cause is against the oppression and exploitation of people, the environment and animals, with a vision of freedom and radical democracy. It fights for justice and equality. The movement is a linear structure where decision-making occurs during general meetings. Various working groups focus on specific issues such as migrant advocacy, workers' and women's rights. Ideas are presented to the core group.

The placement consisted of attending general meetings, assisting in decision implementation and compiling proposals and information for public consultations. *"Taking part in public consultations required an amount of research and analysis"* (Respondent 5). Coalition-building amongst NGOs is a key element in civil society. *"I noticed the importance of coalitions when working within the feminist issue working group and preparing for the International Women's Day"* (Respondent 5). The respondent was able to plan the work with the placement supervisor, do it and review the outcomes (Mant's model). The placement supervisor was satisfied with the student's work and performance. *"She performed the tasks given to her to the best of her abilities"* (Placement supervisor).

The placement caused respondent number 5 to reflect on personal skills according to Kolb's theory. *"Volunteering is time-consuming and balancing it with lectures and a part-time job proved challenging at times. It required planning and time-management"* (Respondent 5). The sense of satisfaction was rewarding. *"It was satisfying to see people attend organised events in solidarity with the cause"* (Respondent 5). Research, writing, and communication skills were essential for this work. This was also confirmed by Edwards (2014) in his research that "the greatest change in students' views following their placement was in relation to their confidence and being able to talk about their skills and strengths" (p. 236). *"Civil society is full of remarkable opportunities that offer immense satisfaction on an individual level, but it also*

offers the opportunity to shape society and put personal beliefs and values into practice" (Respondent 5).

"[Reports on work experiences] proved to be the most effective means of assessing students' reflections. They indicated that there was a strong agreement between students, academic mentors and placement supervisors on the value of work placements. Students were validated if learning outcomes were achieved" (Livingstone, 2019, pp. 100–101). This approach was believed "to encourage deep thinking in learners and prepare them for the world challenges with which they will be confronted, upon leaving [University]" (Livingstone, 2019, p. 102). These reflective reports complemented the responses to the online questionnaire.

5. Discussion and analysis

The discussion addresses the research question with which this study began and assesses the significance of the findings from the literature review and methodology. The research focused on examining whether public policy placements provide added value to tertiary education experience.

From the findings, it emerged that the students set out to undergo a student placement with different objectives in mind. Some students wanted to *"experience a real-life workplace environment within the Public Sector"* (Respondent 31). Others wanted to *"gain a better understanding of the working culture of public service workplaces, the opportunities that exist for employment, and the day-to-day workings of the departments"* (Respondent 9). The *"main goals of attending this placement were to gain experience and knowledge about how the public service really functions, apart from learning more about it"* (Respondent 25). *"I attempted to apply what I had learnt over the years at University to my work placement"* (Respondent 10). One student stated that he chose this placement to link it to his dissertation.

Even though students had different personal objectives, their *expectations* were met. Both elective and compulsory public policy placements were carried out with pre-determined work objectives agreed at the outset. This is reflected in Mant's conceptual framework of plan-do-review incremental change cycle. *"The learning objectives were to put into practice some of the course's theoretical concepts into real-life working experience"* (Respondent 5). These varied from research projects to experiencing and implementing policies within specific settings. Some objectives included job shadowing, analysing agreements, familiarisation with relevant documents, directives and laws, and connecting to candidates from public entities to understand the level of government intervention on active citizenship. Students shared their different experiences. *"I had to review the white paper on the rent law"* (Respondent 15); another reported that *"at first I found it difficult as it required attention to detail and concentration. But all in all, the overall experience was a positive one which met my expectations"* (Respondent 31).

Many of the students were welcomed and assisted by the placement supervisors. "*The staff was very enthusiastic in welcoming me on board and were immensely helpful throughout the whole experience"* (Respondent 19). "The people were very helpful and easy to get on with" (Respondent 6).

The students were given different tasks and responsibilities depending on the organisation they were carrying out their placement. From the findings it emerged that the students' *workload* was reasonable and *supervision* was appropriately given. The tasks given to the students were varied and *"they were able to appreciate the complexities of an organisational structure and mission"* (Respondent 1). *"This placement contributed to my understanding of public procurement procedures and regulations in Malta. It was also relevant to my dissertation"* (Respondent 31).

I was attached to the Finance Department at the Malta Stock Exchange. In hindsight, it would have been beneficial for me to have experienced different departments such as the risk management department or the inspection department. The biggest hurdle at the time was that I was also working on my dissertation. I was reluctant to ask for more tasks (Respondent 28).

Most students oriented themselves since it was clear what was expected from them. They planned, implemented and reviewed the work they had to carry out (Mant, 1997). They did not feel pressured to deliver and were adequately supervised during their placements. "On the contrary, I was empowered to work on my own" (Respondent 16). *"My role was based on learning; I quickly adjusted, and the individuals I worked with were very welcoming"* (Respondent 21). Others needed more time to adjust. *"I had no idea what I was going to be instructed to do during the placement; yet I knew that it was up to me to learn from this opportunity as much as possible"* (Respondent 9).

From the findings, it resulted that the students' *overall experience* was positive. The respondents stated that the placements gave new insights in how organisations were run and managed. *"I got to know the processes behind the selection of ambassadors and their official visits to Malta"* (Respondent 10). The students were also exposed to the organisational set up and how communication takes place. *"I was made aware of the hierarchy, communication flows and internal politics between different departments at the place of work"* (Respondent 2 and 31). "Certain decisions needed to be referred to management, in light of specific risks" (Respondent 12).

Many of the students stated that their placement was a worthwhile experience. Working in an office helped to understand how the organisation works. Networking and interaction with professionals in a similar career field establishes contacts on which to draw upon in the future. *"I felt proud that I have been able to help achieve something as a student that will affect every public servant and will help in the future"* (Respondent 17). The students considered the placement as evidence to their experiences, providing documented contextual proof for their skills and abilities to their curriculum vitae. *"This was a very valuable experience as well a great add-on to my CV"* (Respondent 5). It was stated that *"in general, the placement experience served as a good basis for future job opportunities* (Respondent 31).

Students were encouraged to reflect on their placement learning according to Kolb's theory. *"The placement gave me an opportunity to learn about public procurement. I was exposed to the real-life work environment, and it was relevant to my dissertation and course material"* (Respondent 30). *"I was trained on the job to analyse final project documents and ensure successful implementation. I was to report on the effectiveness/impact of EU funding"* (Respondent 22). An exposure to the complexities of an organisation, the value of IT-related skills at the workplace and the importance of effective communication at the office were lessons learnt. One respondent emphasised *"the importance of time management and meeting deadlines, being assertive and communicating with different levels of employees"* (Respondent 2). Another one stated that *"the placement was a fruitful experience on both an academic and personal level. It gave me the opportunity to gain some work experience in the Banking industry and develop hard and soft skills"* (Respondent 18).

To many respondents, the placement experience was insightful but came with its challenges. Some felt apprehensive as they did not know what to expect. *"I was nervous and shy. It was challenging as I was placed in the Accounts Department which I was not knowledgeable in"* (Respondent 7). COVID-19 changed the way the placement progressed. *"Due to the COVID-19 crisis, I was under constant pressure. The work had to be carried out and completed at home which I found challenging"* (Respondent 4).

Although reflective practice can be a solitary pastime, the academic mentor of Bachelor of Commerce in Public Policy's role was to support the students during their placement. If any issues arose from reflective practice, the students were able to discuss them with the mentor

in a safe and supportive environment. This proved helpful when the reflection was challenging, worrying the student instead of feeling empowered. "Support and insightful questioning can help the [student] to move beyond a blockage, to constructive and active reflection" (Revans, 2011).

Some placement supervisors were not satisfied with the short placement hours. This was because more time was needed to explain the work and learn the required tools to implement the tasks. *"I had no knowledge of some research tools needed to use their databases and complete the tasks. This meant that staff members had to explain their functions, reducing the time allocated for task completion"* (Respondent 25). The provider wants its return on investment in training and staff training.

In planning and coordinating placements for students, it is assumed that means of transport to the organisation is available. This may not always be the case, making it more difficult for students to fulfil their placement commitments. The fact that the 50-h short-term placements were unpaid, students still selected this elective study unit from 2012 to 2018. This showed the importance and value the students gave to placements. In effect, the primary purpose of a placement is to learn and invest in their future career.

The students were asked how placements could be improved. Some suggestions included increasing the hours of the placement, raising its academic credit as well as holding this study unit during summer recess. Some placement supervisors were not forthcoming in submitting an assessment report on the students' performance.

What were the lessons learnt and learning outomes? The respondents viewed public policy placements as opportunities to establish connections to the course content. *"It was a great experience to see how policy is formulated, implemented, evaluated in practice and the work it involves before it is actually published, in this case related to Education and Employment"* (Respondent 19). Students learnt how to incorporate their studies during their placement. *"The tasks were relevant to public policy and helped me network"* (Respondent 10). A student compared the placement to case studies learnt during the academic course. *"Due to the placement, I gained knowledge, some of which even assisted me in the job I had, after graduating"* (Respondent 9). *"I carried out my placement with a member of the European Parliament in Brussels where I learnt how the EU institutions function"* (Respondent 27).

The placements also gave the students the space to carry out research. *"It made me more innovative and open to change and ideas"* (Respondent 14). "Being reflective requires a thinking process that understands strengths and weaknesses and seeks means for their enhancement" (Wilson, 2012, p. 37). Placements accelerated personal maturity. *"I matured as part of the process. It was a growing experience"* (Respondent 26).

The placement also gave them the opportunity *"to learn more about [themselves] ..."* (Respondent 3). *"The academic process is vital; however, practical experience helps students apply knowledge and skills. If I had not chosen the work placement as an elective, this would have been lacking in my learning and course curriculum"* (Respondent 23). *"Upon reflection, I learnt that I personally prefer working alone than in a team. It allows me to manage my schedule properly and meet my deadlines"* (Respondent 6).

Placements were useful to the Bachelor of Commerce degree in Public Policy students, as they developed their research skills and capabilities and enhanced their employability prospects in the labour market. The learning outcomes of a placement included practical experience where students applied their knowledge, research and skills. *"I gained a certain level of confidence in my writings and communication" (Respondent 5). "I acquired soft skills and learnt new tools which would help in future employment"* (Respondent 29). *"I was exposed to real-life experience of daily tasks which were relevant to future job opportunities in the area of study"* (Respondent 30). "[Placement] opportunities may alleviate barriers to employment of graduates" (Wilson, 2012, p. 39).

Respondents completed the questionnaire from a graduate perspective. In hindsight, respondents felt that "their work experience was essential in gaining their graduate jobs, due to the sought-after skills and experience. They used work experience narratives in job interviews" (Smith *et al.*, 2018, p. 366). Placements can also lead directly to subsequent employment with the same employer after graduation. *"I continued improving on my skill set to work in a policy setting, and after a few years I was appointed as a manager within the same organisation"* (Respondent 1).

6. Limitations and further research

Even though the online questionnaire was fully completed by 91% of all the public policy students who registered for a placement, the sample was not large enough. The sample would have been larger if this research study was carried out in five years' time. Although the placement supervisor reports were rich in evaluative text, this reporting exercise added to their never-ending tasks. Further lines of enquiry may include a comparative analysis of public policy placements with other European universities which adhere to the Bologna process (ncfhe.gov.mt, 2020). Research can be carried out on the effect of placements and the students' performance.

7. Conclusion

Universities have an important role to play in increasing awareness of the importance and added value of work placements as a route to graduate employment. Placements which are embedded in the curriculum are beneficial to students in terms of experience and skills capabilities, rather than a perceived economic or social value.

Students, in turn, value placements as "an introduction to the outside world." *"I feel that this is one of the best practices in the Public Policy course which should be extended to most (where applicable) University courses"* (Respondent 23). The effective writings were an important resource of information on the overall experience and value of placements written by different students and their corresponding placement supervisor. These writings not only gave insights into a lived experience but provided a contextual richness in the research.

Although broad generalisations on the findings cannot be made due to the small sample size, the methodology can be applicable in other international contexts. The beneficial outcomes and general conclusions are indicative of the added value, placements give to future graduates. This study showed that a work placement is a critical stepping-stone in finding employment tailor-made to the degree's requirements.

The placement process can be easily replicated in any discipline within different universities. Students were assessed on their competence, performance, skills development and attitude towards work, which made them likely candidates for future employment. Placement experiences "help students to be better in the context of their own lives" (Wilson, 2013) and shed light on the direction of future career prospects in the real world. The students were encouraged to be "the protagonists of their own learning" (Livingstone, 2019, p. 100) through the experience of undertaking public policy placements.

Note

1. ECTS refers to the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System. It is a points system used by universities and agreed by governments, that makes international education more easily comparable across borders. It makes studying across the European Higher Education Area much more comparable. A system of credits means one course or study unit is worth the same at any university.

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