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Student work placements: report calls for better support and integration

More and longer work placements while studying do not automatically result in graduates who are better prepared for the job market. This was the conclusion reached by an expert report presented in Potsdam today. Contrary to the demands of many employers, the participating researchers from the universities of Potsdam and Oldenburg believe that the key lies not in the extension of practical phases but in better support and reflection on placements. The results and recommendations of the study were presented today at a joint conference of the nexus project of the German Rectors' Conference (HRK) and the University of Potsdam.

Although most bachelor's and master's degrees include a mandatory placement outside the university, many universities struggle to combine theory with practice and to achieve systematic integration. "In many cases placements are still simply tacked on to a course, with valuable learning opportunities going to waste. The systematic integration of placements into study programmes would increase learning motivation and therefore student success," says Potsdam-based education researcher Prof. Dr. Wilfried Schubarth.

The report's authors recommend that work placements be given more value and be recognised as a feature of good teaching - because high-quality placements benefit everyone. Students become acquainted with professional practice and contribute academic knowledge and new research findings to the workplace. Placements also give employers access to specialist workers. Universities, too, benefit from the training of academically qualified graduates for the job market and placements provide them a stimulus for research and teaching.

"Quality standards must be defined in a dialogue between all stakeholders - universities and students, employers and trade unions," says HRK President Prof. Dr. Horst Hippler. "The transfer of theory into practice can only function when placements and other links with real-life practice are systematically integrated into study programmes. In addition, businesses must offer placements of sufficiently high quality that provide challenging tasks." Prof. Dr. Andreas Musil, vice-president for teaching and studies at the University of Potsdam, pointed to the important liaison function of university career services: "Our career service already has very good experience in liaising between the university and industry, as well as in quality assurance."

At today's conference, representatives of universities, employers and students aim to formulate conditions for placements that will help to create the necessary skills for the employment world of tomorrow.

Recommendations of the expert report

"Quality Standards for Work Placements. Current Situation and Recommendations"

1. "From a shadowy existence into the spotlight": enhance the perceived value of placements and recognise them as a quality feature of study programmes
2. Recognise placements as important and equally valuable learning opportunities
3. Universities, departments and programmes should develop their own placement strategies
4. Integrate placements into the curriculum and implement appropriate supervision
5. Define the form, location, scope, duration and organisation of placements
6. Make use of placement agreements
7. Clearly communicate the availability of information and advice and the points of contact
8. Develop rules for the crediting of previous practical experience
9. Develop rules for the certification and assessment of completed placements
10. Provide resources and basic conditions
11. Design placements through dialogue
12. Develop and evaluate the quality of placements

Press Contact:

German Rectors' Conference
Dorothee Fricke
Tel.: +49 228 887-198
fricke@hrk.de

University of Potsdam
Silke Engel
Tel.: +49 331 977-1665
E-mail: presse@uni-potsdam.de