

TOM RAYFIELD explains the benefits of 'thick' and 'thin' sandwich courses that offer students the chance to gain practical experience from working for a year in industry and be paid at the same time

Tucking into a sandwich course

The options available for those who aspire to enter higher education following their A-levels are seemingly endless. With thousands of courses and institutes available there are many factors to be considered, but one area, often wrongly neglected, is that of the sandwich course.

A sandwich course is essentially a degree course that combines traditional education at university with real subject experience based within industry. Such courses typically come in two formats, "thick", where two years are spent at university, a third in industry, before returning for your final year, or "thin" where part of each year is based within industry. However simply knowing that you could be spending some time in industry does not tell the whole story.

Within the glossy university prospectus's sandwich courses will often be promoted as "an opportunity for valuable experience" but is this really the case? And as relevant experience can be gained through vacation-based work, are there any other benefits?

Financial concerns

For the majority of students the area of finance is of great importance, a topic that has recently become accentuated by the proposed introduction of increased tuition fees in 2006. This is an area where sandwich courses are beneficial. At present year-long placements are relatively financially rewarding and thus could be considered as a crutch to break the student's fall when they are facing tuition fee's potentially totally £3,000pa.

The salaries offered to sandwich placement students for a year based in industry varies and is dependant on subject matter and location. The average salary obtained by sandwich students from the University of Manchester was approximately £11,000-£13,000 during 2004. Similar figures are found at other



THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

institutions although the industrial placement market is relatively competitive and higher salaries are attainable. A typical example is that of Rolls-Royce who are currently offering up to £15,000 for a 12-month internship in

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areas such as logistics, finance and engineering. Whilst such a salary is unlikely to fully fund a student's entire university education it could conceivably pay for the placement year and assist students financing their final year of studies, a sentiment agreed by Jodi Whittaker a recent Material Science

placement student with Cytec Ltd.

"I found the opportunity to earn real money a rewarding experience it was so nice not to be getting into any further debt. After the year I had even managed to save enough to cover my final year fees and some of my rent!"

Such lucrative salaries are not solely restricted to engineering disciplines either. For example recent economics students on placements with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office also earned approximately £15,000.

Possible final year sponsorship

In addition to the salary paid during the placement year, there is also the possibility of the company sponsoring the student throughout their final year. Such

sponsorship is normally offered with the condition that the student returns to the placement firm subsequent to graduation.

Beyond the financial aspects of sandwich courses there are a plethora of other benefits. For many sandwich students the opportunity to gain “real experience” is considered of greater significance than the short-term financial rewards on offer. In today’s competitive graduate employment arena sandwich students generically have a genuine competitive advantage, with real experience being very highly valued by prospective employees.

Clear career benefits

Dr Paul Mummery, a director of Undergraduate Studies at the University of Manchester, feels passionately about the merits of sandwich courses and the invaluable experience they offer.

“Personally I believe that sandwich courses are an ideal way to gain experience. The industrial placements enable students to develop skills other than those associated to academia. Whilst

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teaching students who have returned from industry I can detect a significant difference with such students being more committed and confident about their subject.”

The quality and relevance of experience received during placements is typically dependant on the company’s work ethics and its position within their industry. In order for students to attain their “ideal” industrial placement experience a considerable amount of time and effort is required during the placement application process.

It is imperative that students apply to firms that are able to meet their expectations and that such applications are of an exceptional standard so that the possibility of disappointment is reduced. Fortunately within most institutions there are industrial placement co-ordinators and career advisers who are on hand to support students through the application procedure.

The general census amongst returning sandwich placement students is that their time in industry exceeds their expectations. The quality of experience is usually very high a view held by Ross Stewart who recently completed his IT placement with Masterfoods.

“Although the work was constantly challenging I found my placement a very rewarding experience. Beyond gaining



greater technical skills I was sent on a presentational skills course and given project management training, which will definitely stand me in good stead when looking for a suitable graduate position. I also found that the placement gave me real career focus.”

As mentioned by Ross, another area where sandwich courses excel in is the generation of career focus. The industrial experience that a sandwich course provides typically assists students in making vital career choices. Many students thoroughly enjoy their placement work and thus return to university with a defined career goal to attain a graduate position in the field they experienced.

These students with clear career objectives also generically perform better within their final year assessments. For those students who realise a career path change as a result of their placement this is also a positive as it is beneficial to identify such a change sooner rather than later. Related to career paths is the possibility that sandwich course students may be offered graduate positions by their placement firm. Although this practice is not widespread those fortunate enough to be offered such positions will have experienced the firm and will be able to make a highly informed decision regarding their future employment.

For a limited few the advantageous of sandwich placements, such as the experience, pay and often absence of

exams are outweighed by some negative factors. Firstly sandwich courses are not for those who are “work shy”. As a contracted employee, working hours will be considerably more demanding than those found at university. Another factor to be considered is that of placement location.

A year in industry can often result in moving away to another part of the country. Such a move will often involve leaving friends behind and the additional task of finding accommodation close to your placement firm.

A final point that warrants attention is that “thick” sandwich courses are typically a year longer. Whilst this effectively means that sandwich students enter the graduate market a year later, they are often more employable due to the additional experience they possess.

It is evident that there is much to be

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gained from selecting a sandwich course. The opportunity to earn a reasonable salary whilst gaining valuable experience, developing a wide range of skills and increasing your graduate employability is a highly desirable package. Furthermore although prospective students should be aware of the demanding nature of such courses it is apparent that a well-constructed industrial placement will almost certainly enhance a student’s degree experience.