



The Vocational Aspect of Education

ISSN: 0305-7879 (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjve19>

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To cite this article: Alan Kitson (1993) The Business Studies Sandwich Degree: a critique, The Vocational Aspect of Education, 45:2, 123-133, DOI: [10.1080/0305787930450203](https://doi.org/10.1080/0305787930450203)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305787930450203>



Published online: 11 Aug 2006.



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The Business Studies Sandwich Degree: a critique

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ABSTRACT This article examines the case for the sandwich degree as the flagship for undergraduate business education in the UK and uses a range of available, but limited, evidence to show that the history of the practical implementation of the concept is such as to undermine its credibility. The theoretical benefits of the sandwich year are not delivered in practice, especially for students. The costs to students and to the public purse appear to outweigh the alleged benefits. The article uses existing published sources to cast doubt on the wisdom of pursuing the sandwich concept but concludes that available evidence is sketchy and inconclusive. Further research is planned at Bolton Business School to identify the impact of the business studies graduate on the labour market and alternative models for the development of business and personal competencies.

Introduction

For nearly 30 years undergraduate general business education in Britain has been dominated by the four-year sandwich degree. However, the sandwich model has not been so widely used in more specialised areas such as accountancy or economics. Work experience is incorporated in multifarious forms in a wide variety of other subject areas. An increasing number of three-year business degrees are being introduced within modular structures and there is a developing undercurrent of doubt about the long-term viability of the sandwich degree.

As the 'old' universities have increasingly seen the attractiveness of business studies and have moved into the area, the number of three-year degrees has increased. The market advantage held by the 'new' universities in undergraduate business education is being challenged and this is re-opening questions about the added value of the sandwich year.

As the value of the student maintenance grant declines, students may have to rely less on state support for their higher education and more on themselves and their families. This may make shorter degree programmes and accelerated entry into the graduate job market more attractive to them. The attractiveness of a three-year programme may be enhanced if it is offered by an 'old' university.

The changing pattern of student demand, the development of increasingly effective competition and the growth of flexible, modular and CAT schemes are serving to undermine adherence to the traditional sandwich model.

It is not surprising that investigations into the sandwich business studies degree have consistently revealed strong support from the academics who deliver them (Daniel & Pugh, 1975; Day et al, 1982; Lee, 1990). HMI (1990) state the case strongly: "Work placements generally enhance the learning experience of the students ... and the participating employers make an important contribution to the curriculum" (p. 17). The value of a sandwich year has become axiomatic in these circles. Employers and students are found to bolster the view taken by lecturers that the sandwich year brings benefits all round – to students, to employers and to the quality of course provision by the academic staff. Course teams defend with an unassailable strength of conviction their view that the sandwich year is invaluable.

The model is seen as successful by course teams largely because student demand has been high. Why change the model when it is so popular? It is when one begins to probe more deeply into the available evidence used to support the continuation of the sandwich model that the carefully constructed edifice begins to crumble.

The Benefits of the Sandwich Year

There are several benefits of the sandwich year which are regularly put forward in the literature (Daniel & Pugh, 1975; Day et al, 1982; Hollinshead et al, 1983). For students they can be summarised as follows:

- they gain experience of actual, real-life business operations;
- they gain confidence and develop important personal and work-related skills and qualities;
- they are able to relate theory to practice both during their placement period and their subsequent return to the course;
- they are better able to make more informed career choices;
- they may be offered permanent employment by their placement organisation; in comparison with non-sandwich students, they have a competitive advantage in both short- and long-term employment prospects.

For employers, taking students on work placement for a year provides them with relatively cheap extra labour with the ability to do useful work. Employers often comment on students' energy and on their ability to introduce new ideas into the organisation. Tutors are claimed to benefit from the contact with industry that flows from the process of placing students and the enhancement of their knowledge of current business practice. For the economy as a whole, the sandwich year is claimed to produce more skilful and effective graduates leading to a more productive workforce. Educational institutions benefit from the additional income resulting from the sandwich year as well as the competitive advantages of a differentiated product.

The claims made on behalf of the sandwich year on business studies degrees are reflected in other academic areas. Computing sandwich degrees are said to offer a unique educational experience at degree level (Lee, 1990). This same CNA report quotes approvingly from a 1988 HMI report which states that the sandwich year is a generally successful component of these sandwich courses and goes on to say the value of the sandwich placement was endorsed by all groups consulted.

It would appear then that all the stakeholders in the sandwich year concept have good reason to be convinced of the benefits to be derived from its application.

Doubts and Worries

The ideological nature of this commonly accepted theory of the sandwich year makes it a difficult theory to test. Throughout the 1980s a few quiet whispers began to be heard. Hollinshead et al (1983) began to criticise not the theory, but its application. Some of the practices reported were such as to lessen the effectiveness of the sandwich year in achieving the benefits outlined above.

Hollinshead et al (1983) found little evidence of students being effectively debriefed on their experience; there was little sign of close collaboration with the employers in developing the course. Concern with the implementation of the sandwich model was further expressed by Benett & Lee (1991), who reported inadequate preparation, supervision, quality of work experience, approaches to assessment, debriefing and incorporation into the whole course. They were, however, concerned not so much to de-bunk the theory as to make proposals for improvements in the practices they found. It is important to note that 'undesirable' practices were widespread; they were not isolated incidences.

Chatterton et al (1989) reported on a survey of current practice in the assessment of work experience on business studies degree programmes. They found that 86% of institutions claimed to assess work experience in some way, but there was great variability in the methods used and in the objectives of assessment. Of the respondents, 16%

carried out no assessment; in only 25% of cases did any assessment of work experience contribute to overall degree classification. With respect to assessment methods, 44% admitted having had some difficulty with them and 50% were considering changing them. Only a "few" (para. 16) institutions set clear learning objectives for the placement and there was little evidence of systematic feedback into the curriculum. The general impression was that the placement experience "is not well integrated into the overall curriculum" (para. 16). The authors regard this problem as the "most intractable" (para. 21) one for business sandwich degree courses. Nonetheless, once again, academic staff report that the impact of the placement period on students is entirely positive and worthwhile.

The CNA report on undergraduate business degrees (1990) identified problems with the sandwich element which it argues require careful curriculum planning and implementation. Major problems related to the integration of work experience into the whole academic experience of the student and to procedures for the assessment of work experience. It also noted the continuing commitment of academic staff to the concept of work placement as beneficial to students.

It is difficult to reconcile the often stated strength of commitment to the notion of work placement as an important part of the undergraduate business studies programme with the evidence from the reports discussed above which indicate that the implementation of work placements leaves a lot to be desired educationally and academically. Assertions as to the value of work experience for students are clearly open to question.

The major benefit claimed by academic staff (see above) as far as students are concerned is that their interpersonal skills improve and that they mature. It is possible that this difference is simply the product of being one year older. It is also the case that we now know that students' interpersonal skills can be developed successfully on programmes specifically designed to do so. In addition the many benefits claimed for the sandwich year must be at least diluted if the concept is not implemented effectively. The evidence from the reports examined above appears to be that the sandwich experience is not implemented effectively.

The question must be asked whether it is possible to implement the sandwich year concept effectively in academic and educational terms, especially within the context of a reducing unit of resource. The evidence from the reports cited above appears to show that there have been many difficulties in effective implementation over the last 25 years with the likelihood that difficulties may increase in the future.

Costs and Benefits

During the early 1980s concerns began to be expressed about the cost of the sandwich year and whether this reflected value for money (e.g. Rise, 1985; Appleton, 1983). The increasing difficulties of finding suitable placements for students as a result of the economic recession compounded these concerns. Rise, in particular, argued that the identifiable additional benefits to the student should be sufficient to justify the additional costs involved. The Green Paper *The Development of Higher Education into the 1990s* (DES, 1987) added that the costs of sandwich education should be justified by clear additional benefits to the employer. Costs and benefits thus can be categorised into those for academic institutions, for employers and for students.

The Institutional Balance of Costs and Benefits

The Polytechnic and Colleges Funding Council (PCFC) funds sandwich places on business studies courses. In the financial year 1992-93 (PCFC, 1992) a total of 31,197 sandwich places were funded at a mean funding per funded place of £2537 making a total cost of just over £79 million. The mean funding for a full-time place was £2636. At these prices, the total funding for a full-time student would be £7908 for a three-year course whereas for a sandwich student it would be £10,148 for a four-year course. The difference in total cost per student would be £2240. If all the funded sandwich places were converted to full-time places this would result in a total saving of £69,881,280 over a four-year period, or approximately £17 million per annum. At 1992-93 prices, this could provide an extra 6450 full-time funded student places.

The amount of funding being channelled into the sandwich mode and the notional loss of a possible 6450 extra funded student places indicates considerable support for the concept of sandwich education from PCFC and in particular from the Programme Advisory Group for Business and Management Studies as well as from the institutions whose strategic plans form a significant part of the basis for PCFC allocations. There is no evidence in PCFC publications to indicate that the council or any of its subgroups have given any thought to the comparative costs of sandwich and full-time programmes. If thought has been given to it, the conclusions reached must be very favourable to the sandwich mode.

One of PCFC's (1992) stated objectives for 1992-93 was to "secure a cost effective system of higher education". If this is being achieved then it must be the case that PCFC takes the view that the extra cost of the sandwich mode results in additional benefits to balance against the cost. However, PCFC's decisions are based substantially on the strategic plans of the many institutions making up the sector and it could be argued that

the benefits will not be felt by PCFC as such but by the institutions who receive the funding to implement their plans.

Benefits to institutions fall into two main categories. First, there is the competitive advantage through the product differentiation offered by the addition of a sandwich year to a three-year degree. There is no doubt that those responsible for developing business studies degree programmes have been greatly influenced by the claimed advantages of the sandwich model and that the sandwich degree flagship has led the expansion of business education within the rapidly expanding former public sector of higher education. Indeed as Appleton (1983) states there existed in the 1970s and 1980s "a conventional wisdom that CNAA would reject out of hand any degree submission in business studies which excluded the sandwich year" (p. 19). Second, as shown above, sandwich students have attracted greater funding from central government funds than the three-year student.

For academic institutions, the costs of the sandwich year are created by the use of staff time, accommodation, overheads and materials. There is considerable anecdotal evidence (from discussions with course managers and tutors) to lead one to conclude that the extra funding being made available to support sandwich students is possibly being used for other purposes within hard-pressed institutions. The loss of this 'sandwich surplus' would create financial problems for institutions.

Gains and Losses for Students

Costs to students will include living, accommodation and travel costs. Generally these are covered by payment from the receiving company. However, there is a much less concrete and clear-cut cost to the student. In opting for a four-year sandwich course as opposed to a three-year course, the student will delay entering the labour market for one year and will have to forego earnings for that year. Sandwich students generally do not receive a salary comparable with that of permanent employees.

This deficit could of course be eliminated if the sandwich students were able to command higher salaries than non-sandwich graduates either at the start of their careers or subsequently. It might also be justified from the student's perspective if a placement period were to lead to permanent employment.

It could be the case that having a sandwich degree might give a graduate a competitive advantage in the job market (see 'The benefits of the sandwich year' above) so that business studies graduates have a better chance of obtaining whatever jobs are available.

Conclusive evidence to support either of these possible benefits is not available. The Central Statistical Unit's (CSU) *Statistical Quarterly Salary Survey* shows initial salaries by subject of study. The March 1992

edition states "Salaries paid to business/social studies graduates continued to lag behind as is usually the case. The average salary paid to Business/Management Studies graduates in particular, after falling for the last two quarters, has levelled off at around £11,700" (p. 2). The same publication indicates that average salaries for economics graduates (generally three-year degrees) were £13,793. This is £2000 more than for business graduates, the vast majority of whom are sandwich degree holders.

The June 1992 edition indicates that "General management/administration ... continued to be the most poorly paid graduate jobs" (p. 11). Figures are not available to show how many of these jobs are taken by sandwich graduates. It is a reasonable assumption that many of them are. An examination of issues 10 and 11 for 1992 of the *Current Vacancies for Graduates* (CSU, 1992) indicates that from a total of 90 job advertisements, the need for a business studies degree is mentioned once only. Employers seem to be more interested in personal qualities and degree classification than in the subjects studied. Work experience is mentioned as desirable on four occasions.

The two Statistical Quarterly Surveys identified above indicate that out of a total of 1483 graduate jobs advertised in *Current Vacancies for Graduates* between May 1991 and February 1992 only 144 mentioned "social administrative and business studies" as desirable academic backgrounds. 690 advertisements indicated that the job was open to graduates of "any discipline".

None of this very sketchy information is conclusive but it does not seem to provide support for the strongly held view of many business studies academics that the sandwich year provides a competitive advantage for business studies students in the graduate job market. Hollinshead et al (1983) concluded that many firms placed as much importance on degree entry qualifications as an indicator of the potential calibre of the graduate as on the degree studied and its classification. This conclusion is supported by an examination of the CSU publications identified above. Little seems to have changed in the last nine years.

Employers' Costs

The only significant analysis of costs to employers who offer placements to sandwich students is inconclusive. This CNA report (Thompson, 1991) indicates that most companies taking sandwich students did not calculate the costs of doing so. Any analysis is therefore based on subjective evaluation "because this is what the organisations themselves do". The report finds costs varying from £3000 to £28,000 per student but no company surveyed found the costs of a student to be higher than their permanent staff and only 20% found them to be comparable in cost. Administrative costs include the costs of supervisory time (generally

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about 4.5 hours per week), in-house training and student recruitment. These total approximately £845 per head.

Employers seem to be convinced of the benefits of taking sandwich students. Of surveyed employers 75% thought students were of definite benefit and 24% of marginal benefit. The major benefit was that students provided additional manpower and they had considerable energy and enthusiasm. In addition students often introduced new ideas, particularly in the computing field, which led to changes in work practice. Of the employers 80% thought that placements were useful in enabling them to assess possible future employees. Of those employers receiving grants to support placement students, 43% said that they would not continue to receive placement students if those grants were withdrawn.

It is clear from this report that the benefits to employers derive from their ability to tap a source of highly energetic and relatively skilled labour at below market rates. It enables them to postpone the recruitment of more expensive, permanent staff. It bears down on costs and consequently improves company profitability.

Another generally claimed benefit to employers of the placement system as a whole is that more skilled and directly employable graduates are produced by this system than is the case with the traditional three-year degree. If this were the case and if employers saw this as an advantage it would be reflected in their employment policies. Sandwich graduates would be able to claim a premium in salaries on initial appointment or at least display a competitive advantage in obtaining initial appointments. The evidence from the brief examination of the CSU publications above indicates that there are good reasons to doubt that such a premium exists. Indeed there is enough *prima facie* evidence as shown above ('Gains and Losses for Students') that business studies graduates do less well than many others in the job market and in relation to initial salary.

The Crick Formula: a flawed model?

When the Crick Report (National Advisory Council on Education for Industry and Commerce, 1964) stated that business studies degrees should take a sandwich form this was widely and enthusiastically welcomed. The Crick Report saw this as an interaction of academic study and practical application such that each serves to illuminate and stimulate the other. During the last 28 years academic staff have tried to implement the sandwich concept. Evidence appears to indicate that the approach is fundamentally flawed.

The ability of course teams to implement effectively a fully integrated sandwich year is not high. Failure to do so is very widespread and is widely known within the system. Willingness to admit failure is more difficult to find. This is unsurprising since to do so would remove

the *raison d'être* for many academic staff in business schools, remove the perceived competitive advantage held, in business education, by the former polytechnics over the old universities and remove a cheap source of labour for many organisations.

However, the pedagogical theory underlying the sandwich model is much more robust, flexible and capable of producing desired effects than the sandwich model itself has proven to be. The claimed educational and academic advantages of the sandwich year can be provided in alternative and more effective ways. Indeed a wide variety of alternative approaches to developing students' personal qualities, enabling students to test theories and to measure current practice in relation to models are currently in use in higher education. Business educators would do well to learn from them.

The development of personal qualities and business-related skills has become a well-established part of vocational education and there is no need for another short review of the range of methodologies available. However, it may be helpful to indicate a range of techniques aimed at providing that link between theory and practice which the sandwich concept aims to provide for students and so often fails to deliver.

First, there is parallel experience. This sometimes takes the form of 'working your way through college' which is part of the mythology of the American higher education system. In fact, an increasing number of students in Britain now have to work part-time during their 'full-time' courses. This is self-organised parallel experience. Students make use of this practical experience in coming to terms with concepts and models introduced on their taught programmes. Organised parallel experience occurs when tutors and practitioners jointly develop a programme of learning which involves the student in an integrated process of learning, doing, reflecting and learning again. Some teacher training and social work programmes adopt this model.

Second, shorter periods of industrial based work may provide a more effective learning process for students. A programme of two or three short periods with progressive aims and increasingly demanding outcomes allows students to relate theory to practice in more controlled doses than a full sandwich year.

Third, practical, skill-based workshops are widely used in vocational education at all levels and can deliver the development of personal qualities often claimed for sandwich years in a more effective and controlled manner.

Fourth, industrial visits, case studies, role plays and simulations are often richer in terms of learning opportunities than a year spent in one organisation on a poorly planned and badly supervised sandwich year.

Fifth, work shadowing is a useful technique for introducing students to particular occupations and enabling them to make more informed career choices.

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All of the above techniques and others are used within the higher education system in this country. Business educators would do well to look at other academic fields for examples and models which could be adapted for their purposes.

Conclusion

It is clear that the sandwich mode of business education at undergraduate level does not deliver all that is claimed for it. Students are kept for a year longer in higher education than need be the case. The perceived advantages for students are largely illusory. They gain no competitive advantage in the graduate job market; their personal qualities and practical skills can be developed in many different ways more effectively than in a sandwich year.

The competitive advantage that course teams were able to claim from the sandwich concept is rapidly disappearing. The old universities are beginning to see business studies as an area worth competing in and they do not normally have sandwich degrees. Financial pressures are forcing students and their families to favour shorter programmes of study and government policies, which are largely responsible for those financial pressures, are not going to change significantly over the next 10 years no matter who is in power.

Just as change had to come for VW with the Beetle and Ford with the Cortina when their models seemed to be as popular as ever, so the business studies sandwich degree is due for a major design review.

Clearly there are enough doubts about the pedagogical grounds and the cost-effectiveness of the sandwich year for it to be the subject of a more comprehensive analysis than that provided in this paper. There is a need for systematic research into the employment of business studies graduates and their impact on the graduate labour market as well as a need to explore more vigorously the alternative models for the development of business-related competences. These are the foci for further research being planned at Bolton Business School.

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