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Report

Analysis of baseline data on MMU undergraduate students' awareness and appetite for SBP careers

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Abstract

The aim of this report is to help to inform the Department for Education's strategy for the school business profession by contributing some initial data exploring the potential 'supply' of business professionals at graduate entry-level. In Spring 2019 a series of focus groups were held at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) Business School with a small pool of undergraduate students with the aim to collate their interest in placement and graduate schemes in professional business roles in UK state schools, along with their interest undertaking sector qualifications whilst on such schemes.

This report begins by outlining the context and rationale underpinning the data collection and offers a brief overview of the focus group method and the 182 participants involved. The findings present that 18.6% of participants were interested in a placement scheme in a UK state school, with 11.5% of participants also interested in undertaking a bespoke sector qualification during placement. This increased to 20.3% of all participants if the qualification was funded whilst on placement. 37.3% of all participants were interested in a graduate scheme, with 20.8% of all participants interested in undertaking a bespoke qualification as a graduate in the sector. However, this increased to 54.3% of all participants if a graduate scheme included a funded qualification, which highlights an increased appetite if a graduate scheme(s) includes a qualification pathway.

Overall, a graduate scheme presented as more popular to participants than a placement scheme, with increased interest if a funded qualification is attached. The recommendation from the analysis of the data is for the Department for Education (DfE) to work with relevant sector stakeholders to explore the feasibility of developing a pilot graduate scheme and a pilot placement scheme. This would generate case studies of success to present to a wider range of undergraduate students at a variety of HEIs to ascertain wider appetite.

Introduction and context

As outlined by Lord Agnew, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the School System (ESFA, 2019; ISBL, 2019), school business professionals are vital for setting the strategic direction of schools. The DfE has defined its strategy for the school business profession as three-fold looking to explore and tackle 'status', 'skill', and 'supply'.

Recent research on the school business profession by the author (Creaby, 2018) was published by the Institute of School Business Leadership (ISBL). It highlighted a lack of recent baseline data on the 'population' of school business professionals in the UK state school sector. However, although not generalisable, the research suggested that there is a potential for school business professionals be in their mid to late career stage and to be more likely have been in the profession for over 15 years. These findings have received considerable anecdotal validation from professional bodies, conference delegates and practitioner networks, and from the SBP Development and Training Board representing a range of sector stakeholders. Thus, exploring the 'supply' of the profession at different levels from entry-level graduates to mid/late career entry has been of interest to sector stakeholders and policy-makers.

Therefore, the aim of this report is to help inform the Department for Education's strategy for the school business profession by contributing some initial data exploring the potential of 'supply' of business professionals at graduate entry-level. In Spring 2019 a series of focus groups were held at MMU Business School with a small pool of UG students with the aim to collate awareness and interest in placement and graduate schemes in UK state schools and collate interest in undertaking sector qualifications whilst on such placements.

Methodology

A focus group method was employed to collect the data in order to collate interest and to probe opinions. Working in collaboration with the DfE Funding Policy Unit, six focus group questions were constructed (shown at Appendix 1) to collate interest in placement and graduate schemes in UK state schools, with participants invited to share further general comments with Dr Creaby after each session. Therefore, the focus groups contained a mixture of quantitative questions and qualitative questions.

Participants (sample)

During March/April 2019, 7 undergraduate (UG) cohorts from different degree programmes were approached in-class based on their programme focus and accessibility via class timetable (a combination of purposeful and convenience sampling). Each cohort group was studying a particular unit on their degree. 3 of these cohorts (final year) were combined onto the same unit, resulting in a total of 5 focus groups. Table 1 below presents the participant numbers.

Course (UG)	BA (Hons) HRM	BA (Hons) IBM*	BA (Hons) BM**	TOTAL
Year One (Level 4)	30		18	53
Year Two (Level 5)	20		17	37
Final Year (Level 6)	45	27	20	92
Total	95	27	60	182

*International Business Management

**Business Management

A total of 182 UG students participated, with 95 participants HRM focused and 87 participants business management focused. This included a range of students in year 1 (level 4), year 2 (level 5), and year 3/final year (level 6). The degree programmes of study included BA (Hons) Business Management, BA (Hons) Human Resources Management, and BA (Hons) International Business Management. All programmes include a variety of units such as leadership, management, strategy, finance, and HRM-focused units, several of which run across all programmes with groups consisting of a mixture of students undertaking different degree programmes.

Method / Process

The participants were invited to take part in a 15-20-minute focus group session facilitated by Dr Creaby. The session began by outlining the purpose and process of the research and gaining informed consent. As no participants indicated their familiarity with business careers or jobs in state schools, the cohorts were offered a brief overview of the profession and the varied contexts in which school business professionals (SBPs) operate, which included information on the knowledge, skills and value base via the ISBL professional standards. As agreed with the DfE, it was explained that all placements/schemes would be in a state school working under the guidance of an experienced school business professional. Participants were asked to sit in programme groups where possible and were asked the questions (shown at appendix 1). The data were captured via research checklist to collate numbers to quantitative questions and via research notes with an audio capture and transcription of verbatim quotations to qualitative questions. At the end of the session, links to resources and further information on the school business profession were shared with the cohorts.

Ethics

Informed consent was obtained from all participants at the start of each focus group. The data does not include personal or sensitive data and students are not personally identifiable internally or externally. All data/opinions collected are for the use of the Department of Education to inform their strategy on school business professionals. The data is also for the use of the researcher (Dr Creaby) for research reports and publications and for MMU programme development purposes as required.

Findings

This section presents the data from the questions in sequence 1 to 7. The data was captured by way of number of indicated yes answers for question 1, 3, 4, and 5. It presents the data thematically for question 2 (23 qualitative responses) and question 7 (9 qualitative responses).

Question 1: *Are you planning to do, or have you completed, a placement year? (Table 2)*

As shown in Table 2 below, a total of 60 out of 182 participants (32.9%) were planning to undertake, or had undertaken, a placement year.

Course (UG)	BA (Hons) HRM	BA (Hons) IBM*	BA (Hons) BM**	TOTAL
Year One (Level 4)	20		6	26
Year Two (Level 5)	4		8	12
Final Year (Level 6)	6	6	10	22
Total	30	6	24	60

Question 2: *What do you hope to get / did you get out of a year in industry?*

Key Themes:

- **Increase employability:** professional work experience was felt to be of value to employers with graduates undertaking placements seen as more employable than non-placement graduates. It was also felt to help to improve graduate CVs, enable graduates to appear more attractive to potential employers, and gain references for future employment
- **Grow a network:** make connections to help gain a job as a graduate, and to develop and gain direction and mentors as a professional in their chosen sector
- **Increase confidence:** feel more informed and knowledgeable about career choices, working life and what sort of workplace might suit graduates best when applying for jobs or starting in a new workplace based on experience gained during placement
- **Develop professional skills:** help graduates to prepare for employment, as well as support them with their final year studies through an enhanced knowledge and skills base, including influencing choices for final year options and projects

Appendix 2 presents the participant responses sorted by each theme above, and by year group.

Question 3: *If you were considering a placement year, or had the choice previously, would a placement in the state school sector be of interest to you? (Table 3)*

A total of 34 out of 182 (18.6%) of participants indicated they would consider a placement year in a school or would have considered undertaking one if they had the choice. There was a slight majority of appetite for a placement scheme coming from business management students.

Course (UG)	BA (Hons) HRM	BA (Hons) IBM*	BA (Hons) BM**	TOTAL
Year One (Level 4)	8		4	12
Year Two (Level 5)	3		7	10
Final Year (Level 6)	4		8	12
Total	15	0	19	34

Question 4: *Is the state school sector a place you would be interested in gaining some career experience within as a graduate, for example as an assistant school business manager?*

The interest in a graduate scheme was higher than for a placement scheme with 68 out of 182 (37.3%) participants indicating their interest in working in taking part in a graduate scheme.

<i>Table 4: Question 4 responses</i>				
Course (UG)	BA (Hons) HRM	BA (Hons) IBM*	BA (Hons) BM**	TOTAL
Year One (Level 4)	8		10	18
Year Two (Level 5)	4		14	18
Final Year (Level 6)	10	4	18	32
Total	22	4	42	68

Question 5: *If yes to Q3 or Q4, you be in interested in completing a sector specific qualification -*

a) at the same time as a placement e.g. L5 professional Diploma/Certificate in school business management?

Of a total of 182 students, 21 (11.8%) were interested in studying for a bespoke sector qualification alongside a placement scheme. Several HRM students indicated that CIPD Level 5 was included within their HRM degree pathway but that they would consider either a finance related qualification or a Level 5 SBM Diploma.

<i>Table 5a: Question 4 responses</i>				
Course (UG)	BA (Hons) HRM	BA (Hons) IBM*	BA (Hons) BM**	TOTAL
Year One (Level 4)	6		3	9
Year Two (Level 5)	3		1	4
Final Year (Level 6)	2	1	5	8
Total	9	2	6	21

b) as a graduate e.g. Masters/MBA or bespoke school sector qualifications e.g. Diploma in SBM, L7 CIPFA Cert, CIPD

When asked the same question but as a graduate, there was more interest with 38 out of 182 (20.8%) indicating they would be interested in undertaking a bespoke sector qualification as a graduate. A majority of business management students indicated Master level degrees were of interest or a finance qualification such as CIPFA.

<i>Table 5b: Question 4 responses</i>				
Course (UG)	BA (Hons) HRM	BA (Hons) IBM*	BA (Hons) BM**	TOTAL
Year One (Level 4)	7		9	16
Year Two (Level 5)	2		8	10
Final Year (Level 6)	3	1	9	12
Total				38

Question 6: *Would you be interested in completed a sector specific qualification, if funded -*

a) at the same time as a placement e.g. L5 professional Diploma/Certificate in school business management?

When asked the same question as question 5 but asked if they would be interested in undertaking a sector specific qualification on placement if the course was funded, this increased interest in a placement scheme from 21 out of 182 (11.5%) to 37 out of 182 (20.3%).

<i>Table 6a: Question 6a responses (IF FUNDED)</i>				
Course (UG)	BA (Hons) HRM	BA (Hons) IBM*	BA (Hons) BM**	TOTAL
Year One (Level 4)	10		6	16
Year Two (Level 5)	3		5	8
Final Year (Level 6)	3	2	8	13
Total	16	2	19	37

b) as a graduate on a funded graduate scheme e.g. Masters/MBA or bespoke school sector qualifications e.g. SBM Diploma, L7 CIPFA Cert, CIPD

Participants were asked if they would be interested in working in the school sector as a graduate with a funded qualification attached. There was considerably more interest with 99 out of 182 (54.3%) indicating their interest (an increase of 33.5% to a non-funded graduate qualification). This resulted in an extra 17% of participants interested in working the state school sector as a graduate than previously indicated by question 4.

<i>Table 6b: Question 6b responses (IF FUNDED)</i>				
Course (UG)	BA (Hons) HRM	BA (Hons) IBM*	BA (Hons) BM**	TOTAL
Year One (Level 4)	12		16	28
Year Two (Level 5)	5		18	23
Final Year (Level 6)	10	4	35	49
Total	22	2	50	99

Question 7: *We welcome any feedback on what sort of experience or opportunity you are looking for out of a placement scheme or graduate scheme and invited students to share their thoughts after session with Dr Creaby.*

Due to layout and volume of some cohorts and time available, participants were asked to approach Dr Creaby after the sessions. 9 participants from across the four groups offered further comments.

Key themes:

- A multi-year graduate scheme with a clear pathway e.g. executive route, fast track, specialist
- More information about the profession and a scheme that can rival others e.g. careers events and similar to other public sector graduate schemes like NHS, Military, Civil Service, Local Government
- Support/funding for training/qualification and mentoring
- Accessibility / location / relocation
- Variation in employment school and/or areas of operation
- Placement scheme helpful to understand the role/offer a taster

Appendix 3 presents the participant responses sorted by each theme above, and by year group.

Discussion and Recommendation

18.6% of participants were interested in a placement scheme. When asked about undertaking a bespoke sector qualification on a placement scheme, 11.5% of all participants indicating their interest. However, this interest increased 20.3% of all participants if a qualification was funded, which also included 3 additional participants interested in the sector if there was funding available. 37.3% of all participants were interested in a graduate scheme. When asked about undertaking a bespoke sector qualification on a graduate scheme, 20.8% of all participants indicated their interest. However, this interest in a graduate scheme increased to 54.3% of all participants if a funded qualification was included. This reflects an additional 31 participants (17%) considering working in a school as a graduate if there was a clear funded qualification pathway attached.

Overall, the data suggests that there is some appetite for a graduate scheme and a placement scheme amongst participants. A graduate scheme appeared more attractive than a placement scheme, with sector qualifications also of interest, particularly if funded.

In relation to qualitative opinions gained, only nine participants offered further general comments on placement or graduate schemes with some presenting with basic knowledge of public sector graduate schemes (primarily the Civil Service scheme and NHS graduate management scheme). The main point from these comments centred around progression routes and schemes involving a pathway to a more senior role over time. Indeed, a multi-year graduate scheme pathway came up in a few comments alongside indication of interest in working in different school contexts. However, it was felt important that such schemes included support, sector training/qualifications and mentoring to help graduates develop appropriately. A few comments also highlighted the lack of awareness of SBP careers, which reflected the 182 participants who, when asked at the start of each focus group, had not heard of the 'school business profession' and were aware of different types of business-related roles operating in state schools. This suggests that as there are no current schemes in place for placements or graduates, there is little to attract students and graduates into the sector. Indeed, it could be argued that as no schemes exist, this could be a barrier to gaining graduate interest in the sector as several participants offering general comments around how it was hard to consider such a scheme when other sector schemes are more established with clear pathways, benefits and success stories. Overall, it could be argued that if a graduate scheme had a clear pathway and case studies along with more information about the profession at HEI careers events, it could potentially appear more attractive to students and graduates.

Therefore, it would be worthwhile for the Department of Education to consider scoping the feasibility of a pilot graduate scheme and pilot placement scheme in the first instance to create a baseline of case studies that capture the experience and its benefits to students. Indeed, despite a lack of awareness of the school business profession amongst undergraduates, after a short debrief on the role and its potential, many participants were interested in considering the sector for a placement year or as a graduate, with this interest growing if there were funded qualifications. Hence, increasing publicity and information around the role with successful case studies of pilot graduate and placement schemes could potentially offer a vehicle to continue to influence the 'supply' of the profession at graduate-entry level. Furthermore, feedback from placement students, graduates and employers could aid in building a sustainable wider scheme to rival other public sector schemes.

It is important to note the limitations of the data presented here, which only represents a small sample of UG students undertaking relevant studies in business subjects in one university business school. Indeed, in relation to the number of participants involved and the approximate student body at MMU Business School, which is a small percentage (circa/approx. <4%), the data presented here cannot be generalised to all students attending MMU business school, nor to undergraduate students in UK higher education in general. However, the data is useful in demonstrating that there is some appetite for the sector from a small pool of business school undergraduates undertaking business management and HRM related courses and offers some interesting data to further stakeholder debate in the sector. Therefore, it is hoped that these findings are helpful in informing the DfE in its future planning around the 'supply' of the school business profession.

Summary

Through a focus group method, data was gathered from 182 undergraduate business students from MMU on their interest in entry-level career schemes in the school business profession. A placement scheme was of interest to participants, with a funded bespoke qualification included on such a scheme generating more interest. There was more appetite for a graduate scheme, again with a scheme including a funded sector qualification generating the most interest. The recommendation from this analysis report is that the DfE explore the feasibility of a pilot graduate scheme and a pilot placement – both including a relevant funded qualification – along with defined support and mentoring arrangements from the outset and a pathway to senior posts within a graduate scheme. Case studies from these pilots could then be used to inform future wider schemes and act as a vehicle to attract more graduate entrants to the school business profession.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Appendix 1: Focus group Questions asked
1. Are you planning to do, or have you completed, a placement year?
2. What do you hope to get / did you get out of a year in industry?
3. If you were considering a placement year, or had the choice previously, would a placement in the state school sector be of interest to you?
4. Is the state school sector a place you would be interested in gaining some career experience within as a graduate, for example as an assistant school business manager?
5. If yes to Q3 or Q4, you be in interested in completing a sector specific qualification: a) <i>at the same time as a placement e.g. L5 professional Diploma/Certificate in school business management?</i> a) <i>as a graduate e.g. Masters/MBA or bespoke school sector qualifications e.g. Diploma in SBM, L7 CIPFA Cert, CIPD</i>
6. If yes to Q3 or Q4, would you be interested in completed a sector specific qualification, if funded: a) <i>at the same time as a placement e.g. L5 professional Diploma/Certificate in school business management?</i> b) <i>as a graduate on a funded graduate scheme e.g. Masters/MBA or bespoke school sector qualifications e.g. SBM Diploma, L7 CIPFA Cert, CIPD</i>
7. We would welcome any feedback on what sort of experience or opportunity you are looking for out of a placement scheme or graduate scheme, please feel free to share your thoughts with Dr Creaby after the session.

Appendix 2

Appendix 2: Question 2 responses (What do you hope to get / did you get out of a year in industry?) Sorted thematically and by year group	
Increase employability	<p><u>Year 1 students:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Experience to help me get a job as a graduate' • 'to help with being more employable and to add to my CV' • 'Experience is helpful on CV, employers seem to prefer it and it helps to have a professional reference' • 'Hope to get a job in the same company from the placement' • 'To be more attractive to employers as having experience could be more valued' <p><u>Year 2 students:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Experience of working in HRM in industry' Year 2 student • 'Helpful in getting a job after uni' Year 2 student <p><u>Year 3 (final year) students:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Experience – good for CV after uni and helpful reference' • 'The experience will help me to get a job after uni as the experience is valued by employers'
Grow a network	<p><u>Year 1 students:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'to help develop a network and connections because it can be about 'who you know' sometimes as they might know of opportunities or introduce you to people and groups that help you keep progressing' <p><u>Year 2 students:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'To make connections and meet people that could help me find a graduate job and develop in business' • 'Work with knowledgeable people who can help me understand the industry better' <p><u>Year 3 (final year) students:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'I had a really good mentor on my placement who really helped me understand how things work and the industry too and she pointed me to different websites and stuff and I joined some forums and we keep in touch, so I think it will help when I graduate'
Increase confidence	<p><u>Year 1 students:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'I think that gaining experience of working will help me to get a job in a place that I think I will like when I graduate' • 'Experience and confidence when it comes to applying for jobs' <p><u>Year 2 students:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'I work a few hours in a café, so I hope to get a better understanding of what working life is really like in a professional office to help make choices about my career' • 'To gain more confidence in choosing the right employer and knowing what to expect in the workplace' <p><u>Year 3 (final year) students:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Gain confidence, it helped me to know more about workplace professionalism' • 'Helped me feel more confidence in knowing the sort of job I want and the sort of place I want to work in after I finish my degree' • 'I feel more confident about getting a job when I leave uni and it doesn't feel as scary to think about becoming a professional in a company than before I did [the placement]'
Develop professional skills	<p><u>Year 1 students:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Experience to help me get a job as a graduate' <p><u>Year 2 students:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'To gain work experience and to help me with my final year options and project' • 'To use what I have been learning here [at university] and get a feel for what I need to develop more' <p><u>Year 3 (final year) students:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'I got to the chance to lead a project and gain some team leadership skills' • 'I worked in a large organisation and spent time in difference areas... it involved varied skills that I can use to help me get a good job but it's been good for my last year as I started to think about the theories and how they work in organisations'

Appendix 3

Appendix 3: responses to Q7: We would welcome any feedback on what sort of experience or opportunity you are looking for out of a placement scheme or graduate scheme, please feel free to share your thoughts with Dr Creaby after the session.

<p>Year 1</p>	<p><i>'I'm interested but it's a bit hard to decide for sure as I think I get what they do in schools but its not that clear. Maybe a placement would be good as it would give me an idea of what it's like and that would help me decide about a graduate scheme'</i> Year 1 Business Management student</p> <p><i>'It's weird to think of a school as a place to get a business job as you think 'school' jobs and stuff and you think 'teaching' as you only see the teachers. Maybe having someone do a talk like at careers events or something would be good as it's hard to consider it when you've only just heard it exists and you are trying to think about your graduate job and it's a big first career step... and there's the schemes where lots of graduates go to and do really well, so you think about doing that really as it's clear and loads of people have done it.'</i> Year 1 HRM student'</p> <p><i>'Thinking about a placement or even getting a job after graduation I feel pressure to look at big corporates that have good schemes and benefits and training, and a decent starting salary. I think a school job would need to have the same, like, some sort of training like you said with qualifications but also a good starting salary and a clear way that shows where you can go with it like other schemes...'</i> Year 1 business management student</p> <p><i>If there was a placement or graduate scheme you could apply to in like a set area, that would be good as I would think about moving somewhere like London as a graduate. And it's the same for a placement. It's not so easy to up and move somewhere because of money and finding somewhere to live and stuff, so like being able to apply to a city or like an defined area would help or maybe some funding to relocate.'</i> Year 1 Business Management student</p>
<p>Year 2</p>	<p><i>'I'm thinking of applying to the NHS graduate management scheme, but if there was something like that in schools that's not teaching, then I think I would consider it because we are always going to need schools and it must feel really great to help run a school and be with the kids and help them learn and grow and that was kind of why I am thinking of the NHS one because I want to work somewhere that helps people but I want to be an executive eventually'</i> Year 2 business management student</p> <p><i>'I like the idea of working in a school and was thinking last year that maybe I'd do teacher training when I graduate as I've seen the Teach First scheme and lots of people I know say that if you can work with kids you can work with anyone, but I kind of don't fancy teaching and want to do something more linked to my degree and so I think it could be a really good idea if there was a business scheme in a school as a graduate but I'd want to know that it's going to go somewhere, like towards a senior job like some of the other graduate schemes do, like the NHS one.'</i> Year 2 Business Management student</p> <p><i>'There's a few schemes I've seen for graduates and you can see where it's going and it's for people who want to be senior in several years, so with the school idea I am not sure about that as there's not a current scheme to look at and no one has done it that you can see and ask and see there's success and you can go to here or there and progress. If there was something really like clear and showed the support and potential of where you could go, then that would make me think like it was worth it'</i> Year 2 Business Management student</p>
<p>Year 3</p>	<p><i>'I am interested in a graduate scheme in public sector. I've been looking at the NHS and Civil Service scheme but maybe a school would something I would consider as well, like if there was an executive scheme or something. But I think I would definitely want to do one of the qualifications and to work with a mentor as I like the sound of the varied role but still want to become an executive level HR director'</i> Year 3 HRM student</p> <p><i>'If it [graduate scheme] was for a few years then maybe I would consider a graduate scheme as it sounds like a varied career so being there for a few years means you could pick up different stuff and work in different kinds of schools. That way you'd have enough time to do a qualification too and work with a few experienced business managers. But I would want it to lead somewhere, like via an executive route or something senior'</i> Year 3 HRM Student</p>