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Student work-placements from the company perspective. A case study.

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this paper is to report the motivations and perceived benefits of companies that collaborate with universities by offering student work-placement positions.

Methodology: The study follows a mixed methodology based on i) a literature review on the topic, ii) a case study survey including companies that collaborate with one Spanish university in student work-placements and iii) meetings with collaborating companies in different countries and universities.

Findings: The most important reasons for collaborating in student work-placements were related to social duty, the opportunity of training students in company needs and as a source of staff recruitment. Conversely, the less rated motivators were improving the company's position within the sector, benefitting from university services and saving time in the selection of personnel.

Research limitations: Future research should include a bigger corpus of the number of universities and companies, as well as the type of collaborations with universities, in order to identify any resulting differences.

Practical implications: The conclusions highlight the need to define/improve the mechanisms that contribute to a win-win context. This is the only way that collaboration can advance towards a genuine partnership that will provide an effective framework for universities and companies to effectively share the same objectives in training future employees.

Originality: These results are relevant because of the lack of quantitative and qualitative research on this topic.

Key words: Higher education, education work relationship, employability, partnership in education, Student work-placement, Benefit.

Introduction.

The Europe 2020 strategy placed education systems in the spotlight for more sustainable and inclusive growth (EC, 2010). This strategy called for the development of more innovative and socially relevant training, and bridge building between universities and external organisations (Ferrández-Berrueco and Sánchez-Tarazaga, 2019) as a way of improving the relevance of study programmes and facilitating

integration in the labour market (EC, 2011a, Lauder and Mayhew, 2020). Moreover, partnerships between companies and Higher Education (HE) improve students' opportunities to acquire competences (OECD, 2012) and thus their employability.

Nevertheless, 2020 is already here and the situation in HE in Europe seems to have changed little (Ferrández-Berrueco and Sánchez-Tarazaga, 2019). Moreover, the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development insists on this issue in Goal 4.4: *By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship* (United Nations, 2015, p.21). This should be considered as evidence of the lack of progress.

But establishing and maintaining a good relationship between the world of academia and the world of work is not impossible. Different ways of collaboration in teaching are usually covered by the concept of work-based learning (WBL) such as on demand training, taking part in curriculum design, or providing for real cases or simulations, internships or external placements. Higher Education Institutions can develop one or several of these possibilities, depending on tradition, type of studies or national regulations. Devins *et al.* (2015) and Ferrández-Berrueco *et al.* (2016a) show several examples of such collaborations. For instance, the United Kingdom is quite flexible in dealing with curriculum design and has very good examples of on demand training. In Finland, national regulations oblige Universities of Applied Sciences to agree at least 25% of the curriculum with surrounding companies. In Austria and Germany, a dual system is well developed.

All these experiences and good practices are always oriented from the perspective of student learning. What is expected, therefore, is that greater benefits fall to students who are at the heart of the study programme. Higher Education Institutions are responsible for designing learning programmes that foster this benefit for students. Hence, most research in this area focuses on collaborations with the labour market from the perspective of the impact on learning (see for example, Ashworth and Saxton, 2020; Inceoglu *et al.*, 2019; or Walters, 2019).

Objectives

Yet to ensure that such experiences are enriching, it is clear that labour entities must be involved. To that end, they must also reap some benefit, since training future professionals can become part of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Costley and Abukari, 2015; Daly, 2017; Garnett, 2016; Roodhouse and Mumford, 2010 and Rowe, Perrin and Wall, 2016). However, for this collaboration to be truly long-lasting, in some way it must also become a tangible benefit to the entity and therefore one of its strategic objectives. However, there is no specific research about the point of view of companies. Why do they want to collaborate with universities? What benefits do they perceive and obtain? What positive impact does this collaboration have on the company?

Thus, our main goal in this paper is to outline an initial approach to the expectations, motivations and benefits that companies look for when collaborating with the university by focusing on one of the WBL modalities: the student work-placement.¹

But associated with this objective and linked to the limitations of working with a case study limited to a specific context, we also consider the need to check whether the results can be extrapolated to other contexts.

Thus, we will first summarise the different findings of international research on potential benefits of collaboration in WBL for companies. Secondly, through a survey study of companies collaborating in external internships (on-site practices) with a Spanish university (case study), we will attempt to determine the perceived importance of the benefits of collaboration in student work-placements. Finally, we will revisit the international context through four meetings with companies collaborating in external placements in various universities and countries. We will attempt to discover the degree of agreement with the results of companies collaborating in university practices in other countries with a greater tradition in this area.

A brief description of the Spanish context

Before describing the methodology, as this paper deals with a Spanish case study, we will provide a brief introduction to aspects of the Spanish Higher Education system associated with on-site practices. There are few examples of partnerships between HE and the labour market in Spain (see Ferrández-Berruoco *et al.*, 2016a), and national regulations that establish the existence of Social Boards at university, thereby linking society with academia and opening the door to the possibility of external placements. Nevertheless, these initiatives seem to be insufficient and labour market representatives do not feel free to express their opinions (Ferrández-Berruoco *et al.*, 2016b).

Since the establishment of the European Higher Education Area in Spain in 2007 (RD, 2007), external placements¹ (ranging from a minimum of 6 to a maximum of 60 credits) have become the most popular form of collaboration (Aneas and Vilà, 2018). However, finding good companies that want to collaborate with the university is not always easy. Universities do not always understand what companies expect from such a collaboration and overlook the fact that they are motivated by some form of financial compensation or other. For their part, companies are not always aware of the potential benefits and impact of this collaboration (Ferrández-Berruoco *et al.*, 2016a, 2016b).

In any case, research and theoretical studies abound on the various elements that make up student work-placements (Latorre and Blanco, 2011). Thus, we can find works about their formative meaning and usefulness (Egido, 2017; Latorre, 2007; Manso, 2019; Ryan, Tohey and Hughes, 1996; Sarceda-Gorgoso and Rodicio-García, 2018; Serrano, 2013 and Tejada, 2012); the effectiveness of the programme (Villa and Poblete, 2004); the expectations, perceptions and assessments of the academic agents involved (students and tutors) (Whittington and Ferrández-Berruoco, 2007; Verde, 2001); the integration of new technologies (Cebrián and Monedero, 2009); the opportunities for employability (Marhuenda, Bernad and Navas, 2010) and common problems in terms of organisation, general functioning and evaluation (Zabalza, 2008, 2011, 2013).

¹ These practices are unpaid, although some companies (usually the large ones) offer students some economic compensation and/or use of company facilities, such as the canteen, gym, etc.

Benefits of collaboration. Literature Review.

In a previous work, we described the benefits of collaborating in WBL (Ferrández-Berrueco and Sánchez-Tarazaga, 2019). Here, we present a compilation with an updated version and new references. Table I shows the review of the literature of the last 20 years, classified into five types according to the relationship with company goals:

- *Economic*, related to any kind of saving. That is, they are related to the perception of increased productivity and money saving: Both are often used in cases when the company receives students for placements. This saving is usually reported in terms of (current and future) employees training and in obtaining free manpower for some time. At other times, when collaboration is not limited to placement, money saving is associated with sharing and reducing expenses in R&D.
- *Corporate social responsibility (CSR)*, the responsibility assumed for the company's impact on society. These factors are related to the enhancement of the company's social image, reputation and prestige if they are perceived to be "helping the university".
- *Social image*, dealing with prestige and a good image. Closely linked to CSR, this image improvement provides good propaganda for the company. It is a clear benefit, but also offers the opportunity to influence the HEI curriculum, resulting in better programmes for students enhancing their employability and improving social benefits.
- *Innovation*, related to keeping abreast of new advances. This concept encompasses several approaches whose common denominator is that collaboration allows the company to update and promote an entrepreneurial attitude:
 - a. Company modernisation through student placements. Students bring new knowledge and the latest innovations that employees can learn.
 - b. Professional reflection. Collaboration enables better acceptance of change and forces mutual understanding. It involves incorporating a learning culture in the company, introduces a continuous improvement cycle and makes the company to move away from the traditional model. In summary, collaboration transforms companies into learning organisations.
 - c. Assessment. Collaboration provides the company with a benchmark by which to assess its efficiency, while assessing employee performance and promoting better qualifications for current and future employees.
- *Strategic planning*. This group of benefits can mainly be divided into two perspectives. First, planning for the future; that is, placements help identify new professional profiles, recruitment of new employees and stimulate staff loyalty. Second, the strategy lies in the possibility of making good contacts at university, which is a source of knowledge and technology for companies.

Table I. Summary of benefits reported by publications in the last 20 years

<i>Type of benefit</i>	<i>Specific benefit</i>	<i>Reference author</i>
<i>Economic</i>	Organisation's productivity growth	Basit <i>et al.</i> (2015); Daley <i>et al.</i> (2016); Jato Seijas <i>et al.</i> (2016); Reid and Bimrose (2004); Roberts and Dowling (2002); Roodhouse and Mumford (2010); Tudor and Mendez (2014)
	Low-cost updating for employees	García Delgado (2002); Guinart (2005); Healy <i>et al.</i> (2014); Marzo <i>et al.</i> (2007)
	Free human resources	Elijido-Ten and Kloot (2015); Author <i>et al.</i> (2016a); Mühlemann (2016); Siebert and Costley (2013)
	Tax exemptions	Daly, (2017)
	R&D costs reduction	Marzo <i>et al.</i> (2007)
<i>CSR</i>	Help students to obtain meaningful knowledge	Garnett (2016); Roodhouse and Mumford (2010)
	Improve students' employability	Daly (2017)
	Help university to improve curriculum development	Costley and Abukari (2015); Rowe, Perrin and Wall (2016)
<i>Social Image</i>	Enhancement of reputation and prestige	Daley <i>et al.</i> , 2016, Ferrández-Berruero <i>et al.</i> , (2016a), (2016b); Healy <i>et al.</i> , (2014); Lui and Ngo (2005); Marzo <i>et al.</i> (2007); Roberts and Dowling (2002); Tudor and Méndez (2014)
	Good publicity for the company	Ferrández-Berruero <i>et al.</i> (2016b)
<i>Innovation</i>	Fostering an entrepreneurial and innovative attitude	Aini <i>et al.</i> (2016); EC (2014); Healy <i>et al.</i> , 2014; Hogeforster and Priedulena (2014)
	Employees updated and better qualified	Antcliff <i>et al.</i> (2016); Basit <i>et al.</i> , (2015); Felce (2017); Felce <i>et al.</i> (2016) Ferrández-Berruero (2016a); Marzo <i>et al.</i> (2007); Whittington and Ferrández-Berruero (2007); Ferrández <i>et al.</i> (2000); Geller <i>et al.</i> (2016); Guinart (2005); Major (2016)
	Culture of learning and continuous improvement is incorporated into the company	Costley and Abukari (2015); White (2012); Ions and Minton (2012); Major, (2016)
	Enhances acceptance of changes	Author <i>et al.</i> (2007); Ions and Minton (2012); White (2012);
	The company becomes a learning organisation (Senge, 1990)	Bolivar (2007); Ions and Minton (2012)
	Students provide the company with a benchmark to evaluate its efficiency	Hegarty <i>et al.</i> (2011)
	Evaluating employees' performance	Siebert and Costley (2013)
<i>Strategic planning</i>	Identify new professional profiles	Guinart (2005)
	Select new employees	Aini <i>et al.</i> (2016); Daley <i>et al.</i> (2016); Elijido-Ten and Kloot (2015); Felce (2017); Ferrández <i>et al.</i> (2000); Ferrández-Berruero <i>et al.</i> (2016a); García Delgado (2002); Healy <i>et al.</i> (2014); Marzo <i>et al.</i> (2007); Mühlemann (2016); Author <i>et al.</i> (2007)
	Stimulate staff loyalty	Daley <i>et al.</i> (2016); Durrant <i>et al.</i> (2009); Tudor and Méndez (2014)
	Make valuable contacts at university	Becerra <i>et al.</i> (2008); Geller <i>et al.</i> (2016); Healy <i>et al.</i> (2014); Hegarty <i>et al.</i> (2011); Marzo <i>et al.</i> (2007) Suseno and Ratten, (2007)
	Influence the curriculum	Costley and Abukari (2015) Author <i>et al.</i> (2016b); Garnett (2016); Marzo <i>et al.</i> (2007); Whittington and Ferrández-Berruero (2007)

*Elaborated by the authors

Methodology

After identifying the potential benefits reported by the international literature, we tested them in the Spanish context. For this purpose, we designed a study survey in three rounds. The first consisted of a series of semi-structured interviews to collaborating companies (n=46) at one Spanish university that helped us refine the findings from the literature review and adapt them to the Spanish context.

For the second round, we used the results of the interviews in round 1 to design a Likert questionnaire to explore, using a bigger sample (n=159), the companies' perceived importance of these benefits when collaborating with the university in students work-placements.

Finally, after analysing the quantitative information and as a triangulation method, we decided to find out whether the results obtained in a particular context could be extrapolated to other universities and countries, and the extent to which our findings could be useful in other contexts.

To this end, we planned a series of meetings with collaborating companies in external placements at other universities in Spain and in other countries, where we presented our results and discussed the degree of agreement with them. In this sense, these meetings could also be considered focus groups, since one of their merits is evaluating outcomes (Krueger and Casey, 2002, p.19). However, because attendees were few (three or four, only the meeting in Spain had six participants—see description in section below), we decided not to use that term.

The results for the first round can be read in Ferrández-Berrueco and Sánchez-Tarazaga, 2019. In this paper, we will focus on rounds 2 and 3.

Second round. The survey

The aim of this second round was to gather information from a broader sample on the perceived benefits and impacts of collaboration on external placements. For that purpose, following the case study, we focused on all the entities that welcomed students on external placements from a Spanish university.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire items were constructed following the economic, CSR, social image, innovation and strategic planning examples provided by the 46 companies in the previous round of semi-structured interviews (Ferrández-Berrueco and Sánchez-Tarazaga, 2019). Responses were gathered on a 4-point rather than a 5-point scale to oblige respondents to make a decision. The initial questionnaire was validated by a group of international experts,ⁱⁱ who recommended rewriting some of the questions and reducing their number. The final version of the questionnaire is shown in Appendix I and included three items for Economic benefits (E), two for CSR, five for Innovation

(I), five for Social Image and six for Strategic Planning (S). Cronbach's alpha reliability test indicated high reliability (0.92), and the construct validity was also good with 66.5% of explained variance in five factors.ⁱⁱⁱ

Sample

The survey was conducted through the university database of companies collaborating in external on-site practices during academic year 2016–2017. This database contained a total of 922 companies, which we updated and classified according to categories considered relevant for the study (see Table II). It is important to point out that this university offers external placement positions to all bachelor and master programmes in all academic areas with durations ranging between 6 (usually in the *Arts and Humanities*) and 54 European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) (in *Health*), thereby obtaining results from every perspective:

Size: Companies were divided into four categories according to the EU definition (EC, 2003): large (>250 employees), medium (between 249–50), small (between 49–10) and microenterprises (<10 employees).

Production sector: We grouped companies into four sectors (Kenessey, 1987): primary (agriculture, fisheries and livestock), secondary (industry, construction and commerce), tertiary (trade and services) and quaternary (information and technology management).

Academic sector: The predominant academic area was determined, as far as possible, according to the company's area of production. In accordance with Spanish regulations (RD 2007), these fields are arts and humanities; social and legal sciences; formal sciences; health; engineering and architecture; others.

Ownership: Two types were established according to capital ownership: public and private.

Table II. Companies classification according to the relevant variables (N) and responses (n)

VARIABLE	CATEGORY	N (%)	n (%)
Size	Large	96 (10.7)	15 (9.4)
	Medium	144 (16.1)	25 (15.7)
	Small	241 (26.9)	43 (27.0)
	Micro	414 (46.3)	75 (47.2)
	(Missing)		1 (0.6)
Production sector	Primary	4 (0.4)	1 (0.6)
	Secondary	103 (11.2)	22 (13.8)
	Tertiary	748 (81.3)	112 (70.4)
	Quaternary	67 (7.3)	23 (14.5)
	(Missing)		1 (0.6)
Academic sector	Arts and humanities	144 (15.6)	20 (12.6)
	Social sciences and law	408 (44.3)	78 (49.1)
	Formal sciences	195 (21.2)	37 (23.3)
	Health	73 (7.9)	12 (7.5)
	Engineering and architecture	83 (9.0)	6 (3.8)
	Others	19 (2.1)	6 (3.8)
Ownership	Public	129 (14.0)	19 (11.9)
	Private	793 (86)	136 (85.5)
	(Missing)		4 (2.6)
TOTAL		922	159 (17.2)

The questionnaire was sent out by email in the second half of 2018. The accompanying email explained the research, the objectives of the questionnaire and the use of the results. After several reminders, it was answered by 159 companies, more than 17% of the population, yielding a sampling error of 7% for a 95% representative sample.

Table II shows that the sample maintained almost the same proportion as the population in all variables, except for the tertiary and quaternary production sectors and the academic sectors of engineering and architecture. Therefore, comparison results can only be understood as exploratory, since the sample is only representative in global terms.

Third round. National and international meetings

The objective of this third round was to validate and triangulate the results nationally, through group interviews with entities collaborating with other Spanish universities, and internationally, through group interviews in several European countries.

Using the results of the descriptive and Chi-square tests from the previous round, we held several meetings to gather qualitative information that would help us lend meaning to, and validate and triangulate the quantitative results.

Four meetings were held with companies offering work placements in collaboration with other Spanish universities, and with companies in three European countries with ample experience in university–labour market collaboration: Austria, Finland and the United Kingdom.

The questions posed to these groups were directly related to the survey results and the significant differences outlined in the previous objective (see Appendix 2).

All the sessions were carried out in 2019 and were recorded with the explicit permission of the attendees. Comments directly related to the survey results were selected and coded within one of the theoretical categories following a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), which was the objective of these meetings (Krueger and Casey, 2000).

Meeting guidelines

The questions addressed to these companies were directly related to the five big factors (Economic, Innovation, Social Image, CSR and Strategic Planning) considered in the questionnaire and the survey results. We then measured the level of agreement with the survey results to find explanations to help us interpret them. Thus, aside from identifying details such as size, ownership and production sector, the open questions addressed their decision to collaborate with the university; whether or not there had been a previous relationship; the main benefits of the collaboration; whether they believed productivity had increased or not; whether the students had helped them innovate and whether they believed that their social image was enhanced through collaboration (see Appendix 2 for the specific questions).

Participants

With the results of the survey we organised four meetings: one in Spain (S)(n=6) and three in three European countries with a large WBL tradition—Austria (A) (n=3), Finland (F) (n=3) and the United Kingdom (U) (n=4). A total of 16 companies took part. All of them collaborated with different universities in external placements. Table III shows their description under the relevant variables considered (categories brackets will identify the code used for content analysis transcription). The duration of the meetings ranged from two hours (United Kingdom) to half an hour for one of the individual interviews in Finland.^{iv}

Table III. Participating companies in the meetings according to the relevant variables

VARIABLE	CATEGORY	n*
Size	Large (L)	6 (1A,3S,1F,1U)
	Medium (M)	2 (1A,1S)
	Small (S)	6 (1A,2F,3U)
	Micro (Mi)	2 (2S)
Production sector	Primary (P)	0
	Secondary (S)	3 (1F,2S)
	Tertiary (T)	12 (3A,4S,2F,3U)
	Quaternary (Q)	1 (1U)
Academic sector	Arts and humanities (A)	1 (1S)
	Social sciences and law (S)	9 (2A,2S,2F,3U)
	Formal sciences (F)	2 (2S)
	Health (H)	1 (1A)
	Engineering and architecture (E)	3 (1S,1F,1U)
Ownership	Others (O)	0
	Public (P)	3 (1A,1S,1U)
	Private (Pr)	13 (2A,5S,3F,3U)
TOTAL		16

*A: Austria; F: Finland; S: Spain; U: United Kingdom

Results

Second round. The survey

With the data collected from the questionnaires, we attempted to uncover perceptions of the relevance of the effects and to discover any differences depending on the independent variables considered relevant: contact person's previous relationship with the university, company size, production sector, academic sector of production and ownership. All the quantitative data were analysed using SPSS software package, version 25.0.

Table IV presents all the relevant results for this round. The first notable result is the high dispersion of data (Sx), which confounds the conclusions. To resolve this issue, we transformed the four-point scale into two categories (recoding answers 1 and 2 as “not relevant” and 3 and 4 as “relevant”) and calculated the percentage of responses that consider the item relevant (Relevance).

Table IV. Descriptives and Chi-square differences among groups

	Item	Descriptives			Chi-Square differences				
		N	Median	Relevance (%)	Previous relation	Size	Production sector	Academic sector	Ownership
1.	Need for temporary staff	159	3	51.6	-	95%	-	-	-
2.	Collaborating with the university is a social duty	159	3	84.3	-	-	-	-	-
3.	Improve the company's image	158	3	56.6	-	-	-	-	-
4.	Publicise the organisation	159	3	60.4	-	-	-	-	-
5.	Modernise the company	159	3	61.0	-	95%	-	-	-
6.	Make contacts at the university	159	3	50.9	-	-	-	-	-
7.	Meet future graduates as potential employees	159	4	84.3	-	-	-	99%	99%
9.	Get more work done	159	3	50.9	-	-	-	-	-
10.	Company is better positioned in the sector	159	2	36.5	-	-	-	-	95%
11.	Students advertise the company	159	2	49.1	-	-	-	-	-
12.	Company obtains more new ideas	159	3	68.6	-	-	-	-	-
13.	Company employees are updated	159	3	55.3	-	-	-	-	-
14.	We benefit from the university services	159	2	39.6	-	-	-	-	-
15.	It saves time in staff selection	159	2	32.1	-	-	-	-	-
17.	It will improve company productivity	159	3	56.0	-	-	-	-	-
18.	The company will gain prestige	159	2	47.8	-	-	-	99%	-
19.	A culture of continuous improvement will be established in the company	159	3	70.4	-	-	-	-	-
20.	We will be a more modern enterprise	159	3	56.6	-	-	-	99%	-
21.	The university will consider the needs of the company in the curricula	159	3	61.6	-	-	-	-	-
22.	Future employees will be better trained in the company's needs	159	3	88.1	-	-	-	-	-

In this way, it was easier to interpret the results in terms of *not at all relevant* when the percentage of relevance was lower than 20%; *mid-low relevance* between 20% and 40%; *mid-high relevance* between 40% and 60%; *high relevance* between 60% and 80%; and *very relevant* when the percentage was higher than 80%.

This scale demonstrates that all the items have a certain degree of relevance for the companies (no item was below 20%). Items 10 (better position in the sector), 14 (benefit from university services) and 15 (save time in employee selection) were rated as "low relevance". At the other extreme, the most relevant items were 2 (collaborate is a social duty), 7 (know potential employees) and 22 (future employees will be better trained in the company's needs).

When these results are linked to the independent variables, the following considerations should be taken into account in line with the significant differences found (Chi-square differences):

First, item 10 (better position in the sector), which was considered of low relevance by most of the companies (63.5%), shows significant differences (95%) depending on ownership, since public companies are more likely to rate this item as not relevant than private companies.

Second, item 7 (knowing potential future employees), rated as very relevant (84.3%), shows significant differences according to production sector (95%), academic sector (99%) and ownership (99%). In the first case (production sector), the secondary sector rated this effect as more relevant than the other sectors. Finally, in terms of ownership, this effect is not considered relevant in the public sector, undoubtedly due to the fact that Spanish public companies cannot recruit staff directly. A similar result is found for social and law companies in the academic sector, though this may be because most public companies fall within this sector.

Differences (99%) according to academic sector also appeared in health companies for item 18 (prestige) and item 20 (becoming a modern company).

Finally, the size variable should also be examined (95%) in considering the need for temporary staff (item 1) and collaboration as a way to modernise the company (item 5). In the first case, small companies do not regard this motivation as relevant. In the second, medium and large companies do not report this motivation as relevant, probably because they have more resources available that they can use to update.

Third round. National and international meetings. Triangulation results

Below we will show the comments made by interviewees as literal examples of five theoretical categories. They will provide content and explain the differences between the independent variables of the quantitative study.

Comment codification was carried out according to type of company and country, using the letters in brackets shown in Table III²: Ownership–Size–Production Sector–Academic Sector–Country. Thus, for example, PrSTEF would be a **P**riate **S**mall company from the **T**ertiary sector in the area of **E**ngineering and Architecture located in **F**inland.

In general, all participants agreed with the survey results. That is, all the questions were considered relevant “to a certain extent, all of them are true” (PrMTAS), especially CSR: “we have the moral duty to do it” (PLSHA); search for potential employees: “it has to do with the way we recruit” (PrLTSU); and better training in company needs: “we engage the students from the very beginning of their studies” (PrLSEF). These

² **Ownership:** Public (**P**)/Private (**Pr**)

Size: Large (**L**)/Medium (**M**)/Small (**S**)/Micro (**Mi**)

Production: Primary (**P**)/Secondary (**S**)/Tertiary (**T**)/Quaternary (**Q**)

Academic: Arts & Humanities (**A**)/Social & law (**S**)/Formal sciences (**F**)/Health (**H**)/Engineering & architecture (**E**)

Country: Austria (**A**)/Finland (**F**)/Spain (**S**)/United Kingdom (**U**)

comments were coherent with those found in the survey and supported information corroboration. In fact, the non-appearance of negative comments for the CSR and Strategic planning categories could indicate that they are the most relevant for collaborating institutions. Table V gives the main comments within each of the five categories. Moreover, they qualified some responses that pointed to possible explanations for the significant differences found between some variables, which will be seen in the following section on triangulation results.

Table V. Main comments (positive or negative) supporting the theoretical categories

Category	Positive comment	Negative comment
Economic	“they always give you a hand” (PrSTSF) “They definitely contribute to us” (PSQEU)	“Not at all. I must be paying attention to them continuously as our information is sensible and it is a risk” (PLSHA). “(…) when they start to understand what they have to do, they must leave” (PrLSFS)
Social Image	“Our social image is one of our priorities” (PLSHA) “I haven’t thought about that… but it would be interesting” (PrMTAS)	“I don’t think it is our case” (PrLSFS) “Of course, it’s an element of value but it’s not the primary [….]” (PSQEU).
CSR	“we have the moral duty to do it” (PLSHA)	
Strategic Planning	“we engage the students from the very beginning of their studies” (PrLSEF) “It has to do with the way we do recruitment” (PrLTSU) “We have a first image of the student, but to be employed he/she has to follow the whole selection process” (PrLSFS). “[….] It is a good opportunity for recruiting people” (PrLSEF) “To find the good sellers we look for” (PrMTSA)	
Innovation	“Very good workers with great ideas [….] I like working with students, the diversity, the ideas…” (PSTSU)	“Large companies provide more specialised placements. That can be the reason why they do not take any benefit in the short-term” (PrMTSA).

Triangulation results

The ultimate aim of the interviews was to triangulate the information gathered in the survey to help us validate the results and make an initial approximation to extend them to other contexts. In this section, we will do a joint analysis of the results to help visualise triangulation.

Thus, for the most relevant items about CSR and strategic planning the interviewees made comments like “we have the moral duty to do it” (PLSHA) or “we engage the students from the very beginning of their studies” (PrLSEF) and “it has to do with the way we recruit” (PrLTSU).

At the other extreme, we received comments that confirmed the less relevant items about Social Image and Strategic planning such as “I don’t think it is our case” (PrLSFS), “I haven’t thought about that… but it would be interesting” (PrMTAS) or

“We have an initial image of the student, but to be employed he/she has to follow the whole selection process” (PrLSFS).

By linking the employer’s comments to the significant differences arising from the survey results, we can support our results as follows:

First, item 10 (better position in the sector) showed significant differences (95%). We found that public companies are more likely to rate this item as not relevant than private companies. This result may be explained because public companies do not usually need this kind of sector position: “Of course it’s an element of value but it’s not the primary [...]” (PSQEU).

Differences (99%) according to academic sector appeared for health companies in items 18 (prestige) and 20 (becoming a modern company). The Austrian participant from the Health sector said: “We are a Public Health sector... we have the moral duty to do it (collaborate with university)” and “Our social image is one of our priorities” (PLSHA).

The size variable also showed differences (95%) in item 1 (temporary staff) for small companies: “They always give you a hand” (PrSTSF) and “They definitely contribute to us” (PSQEU). However, this is not true for large companies: “Not at all. I must pay constant attention to them as our information is sensitive and it is a risk” (PLSHA) or “(...) when they begin to understand what they have to do, they have to leave” (PrLSFS) and “we have to look for other options, for example, extracurricular internships to ensure they stay for longer and we can profit from the time investment made in them” (PrLSFS).

Size also appears as a differentiating factor (95%) in collaboration as a way to modernise the company (item 5). Medium and large companies do not report this motivation as relevant, probably because they have more resources available that they can use to update. This is not the case for small companies: “Very good workers with great ideas [...] I like working with students, the diversity, the ideas...” (PSTSU).

The final representative differences come from the ownership variable. Potential employees were confirmed as one of the main goals of private companies: “[...] It is a good opportunity for recruiting people” (PrLSEF); “To find the good sellers we are looking for” (PrMTSA); “It has to do with the way we recruit” (PrLTSU).

Furthermore, some participants also highlighted the transformation of motivations into benefits or impacts over time: “No benefit, but the impact in the long run is important” or “Large companies provide more specialised placements. That may be the reason why they have no benefit in the short term” (PrMTSA).

Finally, the international meetings gave us new viewpoints that were not reflected in the literature reviewed. They were connected to students’ motivations for performing tasks. In some cases, companies do prefer students to employees because students appear to be eager to learn and are more pro-active, while qualified staff are rather more cautious: “Students perform faster. Graduates perform better” (PrLTSU); “Students always say yes [...] that makes a massive difference to me” (PSTSU). And one last interesting comment about receiving foreign students in the placements: “We look for foreign

students; it is a wonderful chance to establish international connections for the company on their way back home” (PrSTSA).

Discussion and final remarks

Despite the mounting demand from society, universities continue to show very little interest in adapting their programmes and developing close collaboration with the labour market (Ferrández-Berrueco and Sánchez-Tarazaga, 2019, OECD, 2017). Moreover, empirical evidence is minimal in the field of research on university–companies’ interactions, from the point of view of the latter. As Healy *et al.*, (2014) explain, perhaps it “is still in the early stages of development” (p. 17).

For this reason, this paper made an initial approach to the benefits of collaboration by organisations in student work-placement partnerships with universities by focusing on a Spanish case study. Only by understanding what organisations expect and receive from such cooperation will universities be able to establish mechanisms to improve the relationship and thus the quality of the training offered (Eyers, 2005; Zabalza, 2011).

The study aim was therefore threefold: first, to carry out a literature review in order to establish the positive effects for companies of work placement collaborations with universities; second, to describe the perceived relevance that these benefits actually have in companies in a case study and, third to analyse the degree of agreement with these benefits in different contexts on a national and international scale.

Thus, five big factors were established from the literature review: CSR, Innovation, Economic, Social Image and Strategic Planning. The quantitative and qualitative results showed that all the effects reported had some impact on companies.

Quantitative results showed that the most important were related to CSR and meeting potential employees. These results coincide with previous research by Daley *et al.* (2016); Eljido-Ten and Kloot (2015); Felce (2017); Author *et al.* (2016a); García Delgado (2002); Healy *et al.* (2014); Marzo *et al.* (2007) and Whittington and Ferrández-Berrueco (2007), among others.

In contrast, the least relevant effects reported were those related to Social Image and Strategic Planning, thereby contradicting the findings reported by other authors (Aini *et al.*, 2016; Daley *et al.*, 2016; Eljido-Ten and Kloot 2015; Felce 2017; Fernández *et al.*, 2000; Author *et al.*, 2016a; García Delgado 2002; Healy *et al.*, 2014; Marzo *et al.*, 2007; Mühlemann 2016; Whittington and Ferrández-Berrueco, 2007).

Nevertheless, the high dispersion of the responses indicated that companies do not collaborate with the expectations of obtaining the same benefits. Thus, although the contact’s previous relationship with the university presented no differences, variations were found according to company size, ownership, production and academic sector.

In some cases, these differences could be expected, due to the specific typology of some entities. The impossibility of public companies to recruit directly, for example, can prevent them from considering seeking new employees as a benefit of collaboration.

However, we believe the differences in terms of company size are particularly relevant since they raise a series of dilemmas regarding external placements and are connected to the following question: Which is preferable, enough companies for all students or agreements only with the best? Because if the main objective of public companies, and small and microenterprises, which are also the most numerous, is to have a cheap, non-specialist labour force, they are perhaps not providing genuine learning opportunities for students other than the inherent value of experience (Zabalza, 2011). Moreover, reaching agreements with large companies, which do appear to offer more specific positions, involves incorporating long placement periods in study programmes, which is not a possibility for most study plans, at least not in Spain. Thus, the dilemma seems not to have an easy solution.

Furthermore, aside from meeting the main objective of triangulating quantitative information, qualitative results shed light on a series of additional questions that require further research and could be catalogued as barriers to collaboration. Thus, for example, work placement duration is a relevant factor. Employers need to perceive that their investments (in this case in training time) bring some benefit. Small companies, with less specialised positions, seem to reap the return on this investment in the shorter term than large firms with more specialised and impermeable departments.

These results should be understood as an initial exploration of the companies' perspective. Although the international approach has shown that the results can be easily extrapolated to other countries, they can only be used within the on-site placement context. The tradition of collaboration is relatively new in the Spanish context and only includes companies collaborating in work placements. Other forms of collaboration such as going into classrooms to explain the real problems companies face or, at an institutional level, influencing the curricula, are not considered in this study. Both practices are much more common in other countries (Ferrández-Berrueco *et al.*, 2016a,b; Koski, 2017). In fact, effects related to assessment (Felce *et al.*, 2016; Hegarty *et al.*, 2011 and Siebert and Costley, 2013) and transformation (Bolivar, 2007; Ions and Minton, 2012) do not appear in the questionnaire as open questions or meeting responses. In all likelihood, they are effects deriving from other means of collaboration.

Nevertheless, we consider that the scope of the study, which includes companies from all sectors and knowledge areas, as well as size and ownership in a representative sample of one university, provides relevant results that have been confirmed in other countries.

As a final reflection, emphasis should again be placed on the need for universities to use student work-placement as an additional module in the curriculum in order to link classroom theory to company practices by negotiating programmes with entities and monitoring students' performance in-company. In this sense, Zabalza (2008 and 2011) already warned that many on-site practices models lack effectiveness because of the absence of a clear model of external practices organisation. An important part of the success of student work-placements will depend on collaboration being well articulated.

The results of this study clearly show that though CSR appears explicitly as the main motivator of collaboration, this moral duty seems to vanish as soon as the student enters the company and is replaced by other purposes unconnected with training, such as

getting more work done or looking for future employees. Though licit, in no way should these purposes be the main objective of the internship, since the real objective must be the comprehensive training of the future graduate.

Future research should extend the questions related to barriers and problems with work placements from company's perspective, but also new research should increase the sample of universities and companies and type of collaborations in order to identify differences in the effects expected or obtained from different interventions. Future studies should analyse divergences in motivations, benefits and impacts deriving from different levels of collaboration in order to develop a framework of effects from simple collaboration (the case presented in this research) to real partnership (Whittington and Ferrández-Berrueco, 2007). Empirical study in which the opinion of the collaborating entity is considered is rare. It is, however, a necessary and urgent task if educational quality at university is to improve.

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ⁱⁱ The experts were the rector of Vaasa University of Applied Sciences (Finland), an expert assigned by the European Union to promote university–business relationships from Austria, the person responsible for developing learning contracts in companies as part of university degrees at Leeds Beckett University and an expert in WBL, also from Leeds Beckett University (United Kingdom).

ⁱⁱⁱ Results from the Principal Component Analysis with oblimin rotation, as no independence between factors were considered. These results confirmed the structure in five factors suggested by the experts. However, the items adscription to the factors was not exactly the same. We have decided to maintain the theoretical classification as it seemed to be easier to understand.

^{iv} In Finland, the interviewees were unable to attend the same session. We therefore conducted three individual interviews.

APPENDIX 1

Appendix 1. Final Questionnaire

Organisation name (optional but important for good interpretation of responses):

Sector of activity

<input type="checkbox"/>	Primary (agriculture and livestock)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Secondary (industry)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Tertiary (services)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Quaternary (technology, information management)

Please mark the appropriate box with an X.

Your previous relationship with this university

<input type="checkbox"/>	Former student
<input type="checkbox"/>	Teaching staff
<input type="checkbox"/>	None
<input type="checkbox"/>	Other (please specify)

Type of activity

<input type="checkbox"/>	Humanities (library, museums, cultural activities, etc.)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Socio-Legal (consultancy, advice, education, etc.)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Health

Size of the organisation	Fewer than 10 employees	Science (chemistry, pharmacy, etc.)
	Between 10 and 50	Engineering/architecture
	Between 51 and 250	Other (please specify)

More than 250

Ownership type	Public
	Private
	Other (please specify)

MOTIVATION FOR COLLABORATION. Please rate from 1 to 4 how important each of these statements is to you or your organisation in terms of why you chose to enter into a placement agreement. (1=Not at all important; 4=Very important)	1	2	3	4
1. (E) Need for temporary staff				
2. (CSR) Collaborating with the university is a social duty				
3. (SI) Improve company image				
4. (SI) Publicise the organisation				
5. (I) Modernise the company				
6. (S) Make contacts at the university				
7. (S) Meet future graduates as potential employees				
8. Other (please specify)				
BENEFITS OF COLLABORATION. Please rate from 1 to 4 the degree to which you believe your institution benefits from the following potential factors of collaborating with the university. (1=Strongly disagree; 4=Strongly agree)	1	2	3	4
9. (E) We get more work done				
10. (SI) The company is better positioned in the sector				
11. (SI) Students advertise the company				
12. (I) We obtain more new ideas				
13. (I) Our employees are updated				
14. (S) We benefit from the university's services				
15. (S) It saves time in staff selection				
16. Other (please specify)				
IMPACTS OF COLLABORATION. Please rate from 1 to 4 the overall long-term outcome you expect from this collaboration with the university (1=Strongly disagree/never/not at all important; 5= Totally agree/always/very important)	1	2	3	4
17. (E) It will improve the company's productivity				
18. (SI) The company will gain prestige				
19. (I) A culture of continuous improvement will be established in the company				
20. (I) We will be a more modern enterprise				
21. (S) The university will consider the needs of the company in the curricula				
22. (CSR) Future employees will be better trained in the company's needs				
23. Other (please specify)				

*The letters in brackets before each item denote the theoretical category to which this effect belongs according to the literature review and the experts (E=Economic; SI= Social Image; I= Innovation; S=Strategic planning and CSR=Corporate Social Responsibility).

APPENDIX 2

Appendix 2. Meeting guidelines

Country

Size

Ownership

Production sector

-
1. Why did you decide to collaborate with the university?
 2. Did you have any previous relationship with the institution?
 3. What are the main benefits from receiving students?
 4. Do you think production increases?
 5. Do you think students help you to innovate?
 6. Do you think that collaborating companies have a better social image?
 7. (Discussion of survey results)