

An Evaluation of a Work-placement Module: lessons for work-based learning

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Evaluation context and approach

This paper outlines an evaluation of a module (IM299, Industrial Studies by Work Placement) that provides an opportunity for work-based learning. The growing focus on work-based learning reflects the changing relationship between higher education and the economy. This concerns the need for students to develop transferable skills (Assiter, 1995), and to be aware of the changing needs and requirements of employers. As Bennett, Dunne and Carre (2000) point out:

'Not only should students in higher education receive an academic, professional or vocational education, they should also exit with the competencies, skills, attitudes and values that allow them to contribute to the realisation of the economy' (p.2).

Students from the Department of Computing, Communications Technology and Mathematics are able to take this optional module in the second year of their degree course if they wish to undertake a sandwich placement. Within this placement the industrial supervisor and placement co-ordinator provide an environment in which the student can develop key skills, which are necessary for the world of employment. One year prior to the module students are inducted into the module requirements and the world of work by a series of talks, seminars, visits and support sessions. Students are assessed by means of a reflective learning journal, a placement report, an oral presentation and an updated CV.

The learning outcomes of the module refer to the development/attainment of the following:

- Personal development
- Interpersonal and social skills
- Technical development
- Career Preparation and the workplace.

The evaluation addressed several areas: the module aims, the delivery of the module, the development of skills, methods of assessment, the learning outcomes and pre-placement and placement support. Sources of information included course outlines, course materials, employer and student feedback, placement-visit reviews and informal feedback.

Evaluation methods included questionnaires and interviews. At least two placement visits were made to obtain employer and student feedback, which was used to devise the questionnaires. Interviews were conducted at the students' place of work to clarify and expand on information given in the questionnaires. An informal focus created a further chance for all students to provide general feedback on the module. The evaluation was also informed by consideration of the QAA and ASET code of practice for placement learning which provide an important framework for the monitoring and developing of work placement provision.

Evaluation findings

The evidence is based on the return of 14 questionnaires, 10 interviews with students and a student focus group, as well as visits to placements for initial and interim placement reviews with students and employers and informal feedback.

Aims and objectives of module

All students agreed the aims and objectives were clear to them and achievable and relevant. All had attended the placement induction session, where that they had received extensive pre-placement information on the module aims and objectives. Clarity of purpose is a key ingredient of successful practical learning:

“An effective placement learning opportunity is one in which the aims and intended learning outcomes are clearly defined and understood by all parties and where the responsibilities of the higher education institution, placement provider and student are made explicit” (QAA, p.2, July 2001.)

Delivery of module/placement preparation

Additional placement preparation included support and drop-in sessions with the placement coordinator (and author of this report). Students thought that relevant topics were covered in all pre-placement sessions, which had prepared them well for the module. It was felt that the module was well organised and that the students received adequate support.

On asked how they were prepared for the module, a typical answer was:

“Very well, in one word. From the beginning till the end I received numerous support regarding the placement and the unit prepared me well for the overall module IM299” (Computing student).

Development of skills/self awareness

Students were on the whole very aware of the skills they had developed and were able to articulate what they had learnt from their placement, as stated below:

“I have learnt from my placement in which specific area I enjoy working in and I will focus on computer networking. The first 2 years of a computing degree are a brief mixture of all bits and pieces of IT but from my placement I am now certain about my future area and career plan.”

“I have learnt about myself, the people I work with and the experiences I have had, I think a work placement is the best tool that can provide you with the tools to prepare for the future.”

“I have developed skills that are relevant to my field together with planning, analysing, researching and communication skills.”

Students spoke very positively about the value of work placements and all students stated that they would recommend the module to future students.

Assessment

Most of the students were aware of the assessment methods for the module and stated that they were clear about how they were marked. All had received a guide to the module, which states the assessment methods and criteria. However, guidance on the updated CV was yet to be included as this was a new assessment method and a separate session on this was scheduled later in the year.

Most of the students also considered that the workload was appropriate, although two students expressed reservations:

“I think too much is required from the student and in any case you are being assessed by the job on a daily basis.”

Another student commented:

“It is actually quite tough to keep the logbook completely updated. Most of the time your priority is the work or job you have to do every day. So often you have to do the log outside of working hours and it is quite a bit of extra work.”

On interviewing this student and looking at her logbook it was apparent that she had provided far too much information in the logbooks and so was offered advice on ways of reducing the workload.

In their interviews, students suggested that there should be less reliance on academic staff and more involvement of workplace assessors in the moderation of assessment. Students were also unaware of how the module was moderated.

Feedback on assessment

Students receive general feedback on their placement performance by their employer, placement co-ordinator and academic tutor, but no feedback on their report, updated CV or learning journal. As the assessment tasks are summative there is no opportunity for the students to receive formative feedback on the above tasks. Placement visits were therefore introduced to provide formative feedback on the students' progress and advice on how to complete the assessed work. Students also receive summative feedback on their assessed oral presentations and with the introduction of practice sessions they will receive formative feedback – a crucial aspect of good practice: “Assessment to support learning should aim to provide students with feedback” (Chalmers & Fuller, 2000. p.47).

Learning outcomes/learning agreements

From the student interviews and focus group it became apparent that students need more support in writing their learning agreements. One cohort of students had attended a pre-placement session, which focused on this area. Assistance offered to other students was more sporadic and this resulted in many students completing their learning agreement incorrectly. There was also the feeling that there should be scope for students to set their own learning outcomes. Many students had included these in their own in the learning agreement, yet it was not clear whether they would obtain recognition for the extra learning outcomes achieved.

Employer feedback on the learning outcomes was that some of the learning objectives were unrealistic and unachievable, for example:

L4c – Demonstrate improved presentation skills, including interview techniques and CV production. As the employer and assessor have no prior knowledge of the student it is impossible to state the students' improvement.

Placement support

Many of the students felt that they did not receive sufficient feedback from their employers. It was generally felt that feedback on a regular basis from their employers was crucial. Some students also felt that the support they received could be more structured to include regular appraisals, providing of a learning mentor and

involvement in the recruitment process of future students. None of the students were appointed a learning mentor that did not line manage them.

In terms of placement visits students felt that the role of visits was an important one and three students mentioned that their academic tutor had not visited them despite constant reminders/correspondence with them. One student commented:

“My academic tutor doesn’t seem to care because I’ve tried to contact him and had no response and I am really busy at work and haven’t got the time to keep chasing.”

Conclusions and implications for good practice

All students were very happy with the placement visits by the placement coordinator as it provided an important mechanism of support. The general feedback on the module from students was that their preparation for the module was good, but the placement support provided by employers needed improving.

Students stated that the placement visits were invaluable in establishing roles and responsibilities of the student and employer, but new managers assigned to students meant that vital information was not passed on. This could be rectified in future if students advise the placement co-ordinator of changes in work supervisors.

Academic staff will be chased to ensure interim visits are undertaken. ASET also recommends that the university make arrangements for students to return to the university during the placement period, as part of the learning process, for students to share experiences and feedback on their placement experience. This is planned for the next run of the module.

Some students also asked for the employers to be involved in the assessment. This could be a possibility for the oral presentations. A good practice agreement will be also devised for employers taking on placement students. As the ASET code of good practice states, ‘a placement constitutes a tripartite activity between student, employer and university.’ The rights and responsibilities of employers will therefore be formalised. This will include employers carrying out the following: accept that placement students are in every respect full-time employers, e.g. involving them in staff appraisals, provide induction and training, appoint a mentor for each student, and provide the student with a debrief session (ESECT Briefings on Employability). Also, where a placement is required for the following year, involve the existing student in the recruitment process. As Harvey et al. (1998) stress: “If work experience is to be a quality experience then employers must be committed to it and be fully aware of the implications” (p.15).

References

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Biographical note

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