

Case Study | The University of Chester (UK)

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The University of Chester Work based learning module

Since 1980/81 full time undergraduates in all subject areas have had the opportunity to complete a work placement in the second year. Students who do not opt for the placement or whose department does not support placements have undertaken an Experiential Learning module instead. Historically there was opposition in some departments to placements but in recent years this opposition has yielded so that now virtually all students undertake a placement.

During the first decade the module was assessed on a Pass/Fail basis only and no credit awarded. During the period 1990-92 some external funding was obtained to pay for consultancy from the Learning from Experience Trust (now sadly defunct), an agency established to spread practice, based upon the long-established US Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). Placements thereafter became part of an accredited module called 'Work based learning' (WBL) which survives to this day. In 1996 it became compulsory for students to complete the WBL module or an alternative.

Over the years many features of the module have remained the same. From the start students were required to do a job while on placement and not just observe. Each placement has a job description created by employers based on a template provided by the University. Some things have changed. For many years, the module was principally concerned with reflective learning. The principal mechanism for fostering reflective thinking from lived experience was a reflective review, written as part of the assessment. That element is still present although in recent years there is greater emphasis upon using the placement as the basis for thinking about upon career selection. When the University moved from a 15 credit based system to 20 credits (10 credits ECTS), the credit tariff reduced from 30 to 20 credits. This reduced the notional learning time so that now students spend just five weeks on placement. The other element which has been lost is a post placement presentation and discussion among students.

Facilitating placements for the best part of 2000 students is an enormous undertaking and the University has had to create the resources to facilitate the process. There is a full time team of administrators who find employers willing to host students. Every year 'vacancies' are advertised which students can apply for or they can arrange their own placement. Each student goes through a process of negotiation with an administrator to find an appropriate placement. Most placements are in the Chester area but many students who originate from other parts of the country (or world) prefer to have placements close to home. There is also a specialist team which arranges international placements. Every effort is made to match student aspirations to placements but this is not always possible. For example, for many more students study law than there are vacancies for lawyers. A failure to find a legal placement is sometimes the first time law students are confronted with the reality of the labour market. Over the years the university has built up relationships with a large number

of employers. A formal agreement is signed between the university, student and employer and employers create a job description, using a template. Although students are not paid whilst on placement, the university pays travel expenses – except for international students – and insures students on placement. The job description sets the limits of students' engagement. It is a way for the university to ensure that students are involved in appropriate activities and not exploited or misused. Employers benefit from the placement by getting a free pair of hands for five weeks as students are not paid during the placement. They also have the chance to potential employees. Employers are given a guide explaining the role of the placement, how it is assessed, what the students are supposed to be doing and other useful guidelines. Many students are used by organisations to perform tasks they would like to do but do not have the time or resources. A good example of this in recent years has been the number of companies keen to improve their web presence but lacking in the skills to do so.

Although students are required to work they are not employees. The purpose of the placement is sensitise students to the idea of the workplace as not just a site of work but a place which encompasses knowledge and is therefore also a site of learning. Underpinning the WBL module is the idea that students learn by engaging in practical tasks in a structured way and given the analytical means (reflective learning) to make explicit their learning. This is in order to prepare them for a lifetime of practice knowledge acquisition- lifelong learning.

For organisational purposes students are put into cohorts of 20-25 and allocated a tutor. This requires the recruitment of 50-60 tutors from around the university able and willing to facilitate the process. The tutor is responsible for induction, support for the student in placement and first assessment. When students are on placement the tutor contacts the placement provider to ensure everything is OK. Tutors also send the students a weekly message reminding them what they should do. Because of the turnover of tutors and minor changes to the module there are annual induction sessions for tutors. The major task in assessment is to ensure consistency. Tutors come from a variety of disciplines and are delivering the module for the first time. There is therefore internal moderation with inexperienced tutors paired with experienced tutors in the first instance and a further process of moderation by specialists. Standards and consistency are also overseen by External Examiners- academic tutors with expertise in the area from other universities.

Student learning is supported by dedicated online resources. There is a handbook and multiple other supporting materials. For many years we have been buying e-books so that students can access relevant learning materials wherever they are. Formative assessment is also used as students are not used to writing reflectively, in the first person. Students are expected to use relevant academic literature to frame and contextualise their experience. Assessments are graded as is appropriate for the level of learning as would be the case in any other module in accordance with European Qualification Framework standards. The only difference is that 10% of the mark is awarded by the employer/placement provider. No matter how much guidance we give employers in respect of academic standards they tend to give high marks out of appreciation for the efforts of the students. This has been debated

many times over the years but we think it is important employers have a say in how students have performed.

I have been a tutor on this module since 2005 and this year is the first where I will not be involved. In that time I have seen hundreds of students and spoken to each of them individually about their aspirations and plans. As I have a background in the landed professions I am given students with that type of interest and I have been able to assist many on their first steps. I am still in occasional contact with some of those former students, whose career really started following a successful placement.

On the lighter side there are also some students you never forget. In that category was a young lady who had a placement at a local aquarium. When checking the water temperature, an octopus grabbed the thermometer and she fell in trying to get it back. The ones in the local zoo are quite funny too- five weeks of shovelling lion poo! It is also the case that for some students the placement is a useful reality check. I have supervised students who have discovered their dream job is not at all what they anticipated and they have had to rethink their career plans.

Occasionally things go wrong and we have had students sacked for a variety of reasons and we have had instances where we have had to remove students for their own good. The most difficult placements to manage in this respect are the international ones. We have had instances where students have had mishaps and someone had had to go and rescue them.

Having said that, the University is very proud of its WBL module and many students say it is the best thing they did in their time at Chester. What makes it distinctive is that it is open to everyone, irrespective of subject and it aims to inculcate an understanding of the workplace as a site of learning. It therefore helps with the transition from formal education to full time working and lays the groundwork for lifelong learning.