



Profiting from Placements and Work-Based Learning: Realising the potential

Thursday 8th May 2008, Robbins Conference Centre

Conference Report

This was the fifth annual conference organised by the University of Plymouth's Placements and Work Experience Group (PWEG) for those involved in the management and delivery of placement and work based learning with University students. 74 people attended the day, including participants from the Senior Management Team, Health, Geography, Environmental Science, Biological Science, Computing, Social Work, Education, Engineering, Plymouth Business School, Architecture, Law, Cornwall College, South Devon College, City College Plymouth, Somerset College, City of Bristol College, Highlands College, Careers Service, Research and Innovation, Marketing & Communications, Disability ASSIST Services, Quality Support, Library Services, CEPPL CETL, Experiential Learning CETL, HELP CETL, practice educators from the Health Service, employers and students engaged in work based and placement learning.

The conference aims were:

- To share information and experience to help maximise the benefits of placement and work based learning for stakeholders
- To contribute to agenda setting in relation to placement and work based learning
- To value the diversity of practice

Programme

The conference was opened by **Pro Vice-Chancellor Professor Neil James** who welcomed delegates and introduced the conference. Setting the broader context with reference to the Leitch Report, he asked delegates to consider, [*Placement and work based learning: why are they important?*](#), identifying the benefits and sharing his own experience of placements as an engineering student in South Africa.

The keynote speaker, was **Nicky Taylor**, the Training and Communication Manager from [*Ginsters*](#), a locally grown company based in Callington, but with a national reputation and host to many University placement students. Through her presentation, [*Realising the potential of student*](#)

[placements: a business perspective](#)' Nicky offered an insight into the history, values and priorities for Ginsters, and their expectations of those who join them, whether as a student or permanent employee.

She identified some of the attributes that employers look for, which students need to be aware of: drive, enthusiasm, team work & innovation; lifelong learners, change agents & communicators; and leaders in their own right who have focus. Responding to the conference theme, she continued by outlining strategies for students to get the most out of their work placement:

- Be clear about what you want to achieve through your placement
- Negotiate the experience you want with an employer
- Ask regularly for feedback on your performance
- Build your profile throughout the business – learn how to stand out
- Go for it - be bold – look for opportunities
- Leave your legacy – what do you want to be famous for?
- Maintain links with the employer afterwards

The student message was reinforced by clips from the recent BBC programme, *Working Lunch*, which reported on the experience of a University of Plymouth student on placement at Ginsters. Nicky also offered advice to other employers involved with work based and placement learning. The presentation was very well received and was referred to throughout the day. Nicky was also able to join and contribute to the afternoon workshops.

Following coffee five parallel workshops were offered, sharing experience from across four different faculties. Details of the workshops, including presentation materials can be viewed through the [workshop](#) link:

- a) *What's educational about Work-based Learning? Developments in the BA (Hons) Education Studies programme?* **Ruth Boyask**, & colleagues (Faculty of Education)
- b) *Supporting Disabled Students during Work-based Learning.* **Deidre Ford** (Centre for Excellence in Professional Placement Learning – CEPPL), **Terry Dowling** (Disability ASSIST)
- c) *Overseas placements: two approaches.* **Suzanne Tolan** (Faculty of Health and Social Work), **Sue Stacey** (Plymouth Business School) & colleagues
- d) *Working with employers to mentor and assess Foundation Degree students* **Steve Rose** (Somerset College), **Kerry Reynolds** (Cornwall College), **Duncan Harvey** (City College Plymouth)
- e) *Supporting learners in practice: the Placement Development Team model.* **Susan Twose**, **Jenny Temple** (Faculty of Health and Social Work)

The final session before lunch was a 'Speed Updating' session, chaired by **Professor Susan Lea**, Director of the Centre for Professional Practice Learning – CEPPL, and offering six three minute presentations on developments in work based and placement learning:

1. [Brian Chalkley](#), GEES Subject Centre – [Skills Plus](#) Re-launched
2. [Jane Gill](#) - [Shell STEP](#), *Summer vacation opportunities for project based work in small to medium sized companies*
3. [Trish Woods](#), South Devon College - [Approaches to Work Based Learning within a predominately freelance practice based industry](#)

4. [Paul Lunt](#), School of Ocean Earth and Environmental Science – *The Advanced Work Based Learning Enterprise Project – an alternative model for final year projects*
5. [Emma Hewitt](#), Knowledge Transfer Manager – [Knowledge Transfer Update](#), *Research and Innovation*
6. [Susan Lea](#), CEPPL Director – [Innovation Fund](#) opportunities for work based and placement learning

After lunch **Pete Watton**, Chair of the Placements & Work Experience Group (PWEG) offered a [Work Based and Placement Learning Update](#) highlighting some of the major developments over the last year, including the institutional risk assessment of work based and placement learning, introduction of a University Health and Safety code of practice, revision of the QAA code of practice and current development of the Learning and Teaching strategy. He pointed to a number of useful resources produced as a result of these developments, in particular the [Handbook for the Management and Delivery of Work Based and Placement Learning](#) and referred delegates to the [Essential Information](#) section of the Skills Plus community.

The remainder of the afternoon was focused directly on the conference theme, Profiting from work based and placement learning; how to realise the potential. The session started with a multimedia presentation introduced by **Clare Gray** from UPC, **Mandy Aggett** from PBS and supported by **Kat Gibson**, herself a placement student with the Experiential Learning CETL. The presentation draw on interviews with key stakeholders conducted by the team and edited by a further placement students attached to UPC, **Mark Treagust**. This was an ambitious project involving many hours of filming which was not quite completed to the satisfaction of the team but which nevertheless provided an excellent trigger for subsequent discussions. Further editing of the interviews will take place and this resource will be used more widely, including through the Placements website.

The presentation was followed with group discussions looking in detail at how the different stakeholders can maximise the benefit of work based and placement learning. Drawing on their own experience and contributions and discussion from though out the day each group reviewed, recorded and offered feedback on how the full potential of work based and placement learning might be realised. The [final plenary](#), facilitated by **Pete Watton** and **Ruth Weaver** from the Experiential Learning CETL, received the feedback and considered next steps for the PWEG to take forward. The overall feedback has been collated into, '[Conference outcomes: how can we fully realise the potential of placement & work based learning](#)'?, now available for work-based and placement learning teams to refer to and has presented to the subsequent meeting of PWEG.

Conclusion

Overall the conference appeared a success, identifying ways to more effectively profit from work-based and placement learning and addressing each of the day's aims:

- sharing information and experience to help maximise the benefits of placement and work based learning for stakeholders, through the day's activities and informal discussions
- valuing the diversity of practice, through the range of contributors and participants
- contributing to agenda setting in relation to placement and work based learning, through what delegates took away them but also formally through the information presented back to PWEG and disseminated through this report .

.General feedback on the day was very positive:

- *Very informative, good workshop and discussions;*
- *Excellent event – thanks!*
- *Thanks, a good day;*
- *Interesting day*
- *Thank you for a stimulating day.*

Attendance at the event, with 74 delegates, was perhaps less than might have been hoped for but remains impressive given that Skills Plus, CEPPL and Experiential CETL conferences had all taken place in the preceding two weeks. University staff attended from a range of disciplines, with all but one faculty being represented. Whilst most delegates heard about the conference via email the use of internal websites and posters also featured.

The most popular session of the day was the presentation by Nicky Taylor from Ginsters (*...an eye opener on a major local employer; Nicky's presentation was excellent*). However, some delegates also identified other sessions as the best part of the day (including networking, discussion groups, the multimedia presentation and the PWEG update), suggesting that the variety of activity was appropriate.

There were some constructive suggestions for future improvements, in particular the desire for greater employer and student involvement, both as presenters and delegates: *more keynotes from local employers; Include more from partner college students i.e. work experience to support local SMEs.*

There were a small number comments about scheduling, including running the conference later in the year, starting later in the morning and allowing opportunities to attend more than one workshop. There was little comment on the venue, although one delegate did remark, '*Not the easiest place for a wheelchair user – especially as I had to cross the road for one of the workshops*'.

In addition to the more detailed feedback on how to maximise the benefits of work based and placement learning captured through the afternoon workshops delegates were asked to identify what they were personally going to now do to get the most out of work based and placement learning. Responses included:

- *Greater reference to and use of the online Handbook for Management and Delivery of Work Based and Placement Learning and associated materials, such as the Learning Agreement*
- *Continuing to push for more effective IT systems for managing work-based and placement learning and for managing employer contacts*
- *Getting more feedback from students and employers*
- *Developing an employer handbook and developing a sound approach to involving SMEs in WBL*
- *Reviewing and using the disability A-Z developed by the CEPPL / Disability ASSIST project*

The main suggestions for University priorities identified through the evaluation included:

- *The development of a standardised, stakeholder wide IT system for the management of work based and placement learning*
- *Making the placement year credit rated; and the stage 2 placement preparation a credit rated module*
- *Improving marketing for both internal and external communication; better co-ordination between interested offices*
- *Continuing to support employers & training if needed; training of mentors re attitudes towards disability*

- *More / better student and employer feedback and using it more effectively*
- *Increased take up by programme development teams; including Skills Plus coverage in validation documentation.*
- *Improving the Placements community on the portal*

Feedback from the day will be disseminated through this report and published on the Skills Plus and Placements communities. The detailed responses from the workshops will also be reviewed by the Placements and Work Experience Group and where appropriate and feasible actioned. This PWEG commitment to take forward outcomes from the conference remains an important feature, which one delegate identified as one of the strengths of the day:

“I can see concrete outcomes from previous conferences coming through as practical outcomes”.

The success of this year’s conference will also be judged by its impact on practice. Will we be better able to realise the potential of work based and placement learning?

Pete Watton
Placements and Work Experience Group
22/5/08