

Student Placement Journeys - An on-line collection of video resources showcasing the development of students on one year work placements with views from their employers and placement tutors.

Abstract - At the University of Huddersfield our strategic aim is 'to produce enterprising and employable graduates'. We are committed to the value of work placements to such an extent that they are 'fee free'. We have produced and disseminated materials showing the benefits students can gain from work placements in terms of improved career choices, salaries and degree classifications. In 2006, we showcased placements across the University with our 'Placement Podcasts' DVD. In 2007, we extended the project further to follow students on their placement journeys. We are currently following 14 students across 9 employers within a range of sectors including manufacturing, design, education and hospitality. On line resources are being developed to explore each student's journey, including:

- The early days of work placement
- Well into the work placement, filmed at employers
- The employer's view of both their placement student and the concept of work placements
- The student in their final year – a reflection of the benefits of their placement
- The Placement Tutor's views of student development over the placement process.

The workshop will explain:

- How the project was managed
- A critical evaluation of the approach
- Learning points
- A discussion of what has worked well and what improvements can be made
- Implications to teaching and learning and the curriculum.

Introduction and Literature Review

This discussion paper for a workshop will explain about our teaching and learning project, 'Student Placement Journeys'. Our university's strategic aim is 'to produce enterprising and employable graduates'. Leitch, in his 'Review of Skills' emphasises the UK's strategic need to develop higher level skills. Whereas the Cox Review states, 'greater creativity is a key to greater productivity'. Harvey and Little (2006) explain that, 'since 1999, there has been a steady decline in the number of undergraduates taking up placements'. Despite this they also say, 'it is

clear that students continue to draw very tangible learning gains from work experiences planned as part of their overall programme.’ Back in 2004, only around 50% of our students who had enrolled on sandwich degrees (co-op) took the year long work placement route. Our initial review presented at a Higher Education Academy Conference showed that our students who did placements tended to get better jobs, salaries and degree classifications. To encourage our students to take up work placements our project ‘Placement Podcasts’ presented at WACE 2007, showcased 12 work placement students. Our current work is following 14 different students on their placement journeys. A paper discussing both students and employers views was presented at WACE Asia-Pacific in 2008. The project is now into its final phase and will look at the student placement journey at three different time points from their own perspective and that of their employers and placement tutors. Work to date can be viewed at www.hud.ac.uk/tqef/placement.html

The work has been produced in house with a project manager and a technical project officer. For ‘Placement Podcasts’ students were recruited via our job shop. However, our partner placement offices wanted to choose their own students and companies, and focus on the one year sandwich work placement for which Huddersfield is renowned. Together we selected nine companies and fourteen students from a range of industries including manufacturing, education and design. We sought and gained permission for filming with these employers. However a drawback of the selection process has been that some students have not come across well on camera. The self-selecting students for the first phase proved to be more outgoing and dynamic.

Discussion of Issues

Project filming has been immensely time consuming. We filmed students at university prior to starting their placements. Having already gained an understanding of generic skills from our previous work, we did not want our films to repeat this. Previously, we had found that the best comments were often after the camera had been switched off. So in an attempt to gain authenticity, we filmed semi-structured interviews, which took up to one hour. Our aim was to compact these down to two minutes, a reasonable concentration time for the viewer. A typist was employed to transcribe all the interviews to make it easier to edit and look for original material and coherent reflections. We aimed to select around five paragraphs of material, as when spoken each one lasted about 30 seconds. During editing we discovered that the films were not as ‘clean’ as the transcripts with speech running together. It was very difficult to edit the films without them being disjointed. Midpoint filming took place at the

employer's site, some local and a few involving overnight stays. We discovered that filming the student alongside the employer worked well. We left each workplace with up to four clips: a focus on the company and what it does, students views, employers views and the student in the workplace. Throughout the project there have been lots of technical challenges including deciding what to film, the best environment (most workplaces are not very quiet as a filming backdrop), the use of editing software, constructing websites, and professionally presenting materials. Finding places to film has always been a challenge, at university we have used a quiet conference room, but still get some background noise. At employers finding the right location was even more difficult. Noise and sound levels have been key issues; be this the pouring of a glass of water, or an aircraft overhead, the best quotes always seem to be when something else is going on. Also at the companies, what we were allowed to film varied enormously: from production, processes and offices to almost hiding in a bland conference room where trade secrets could not be discovered. Editing of our films is well underway and in coming weeks we plan to film the students in their final year at university alongside their academic supervisors. Web based placement journeys are being constructed. Each web page contains a 'journey' based at one employer. Each short film can be played as a standalone segment. These films represent real journeys, with students growing in confidence. It is envisaged that the web pages will have a life of up to five years and that students will be able to watch the films at home and learn about what going on placement is like.

Learning Points

We still have much to learn about the editing process; it is difficult to pull out salient points in 30 second chunks, even though typing up definitely helped us to select the best material. However our open ended approach to questioning had left us with too large a quantity of footage to be economic. How articulate the student were varied enormously (much more so than our previous work). Whilst with students we often guided them through the questions, with some employers we could hardly get a word in, and found ourselves being talked at for over an hour. Maybe it would be better to return after our reflection and refilm only the salient points. However this would mean two filming sessions at different time scales. Alternatively we could make our own notes of the key points, then just film focusing on these key areas. We could just ask less questions, but then the answers tend to be generic. With hindsight rather than trying to follow 14 students, we might have been better focusing on a fewer students. This would have achieved similar outcomes, but been less time consuming.

In many ways this project may have been too ambitious for the timescales, budgets and resources. Our initial podcast work took us several months to complete. This time we increased the work five fold, aiming to produce around 60 short films. Whilst we had the equipment, tools and budget, we didn't properly estimate the time commitments in the projects. However the verbal feedback we have received from our UK and International Conferences indicates that this work is truly innovative. For our DVD we have received requests from conference delegates worldwide. Our DVD is also in teaching at a prestigious Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning at Sheffield Hallam University. We have also received an invitation explore joint work with an institution in Austria. We have not found another university with a similar project to 'Student Placement Journeys'. Our resources when they are complete will provide a video overview of the placement process. Our work has inspired others such as the University of Ulster to consider how video and web based resources can be used to support teaching and learning.

Conclusions and Implications

This project impacts on teaching and learning in the curriculum, as Little and Harvey (2006) show clearly much learning goes on whilst the student is in the workplace. It is hoped that students will reflect on their placements in the final phase of filming. A key learning points from the project is the employer's perspective, emphasised in our composite film, presented as part of our previous paper. These can be used to assist students in understanding what employers want when they attend interviews. For example one employer talked of the problem solving skills articulated by a student bar worker who moved a bottle collection bucket to a better location. It is important for students to be able to articulate their generic skills to gain employment. For example one employer stated, 'students are here to be trained,' he did not expect the finished article. These comments from employers could be used to produce a webpage, 'employers answer your questions about work placements'. Our full transcripts represent a contemporary view of what's its like on work placement. Full qualitative analysis of these can take place. Cross University feedback events are planned once the 'journeys' are completed. Staff will be invited to view their students on their journey. Groups will be facilitated to understand how lessons learned from placements can be integrated into the curriculum.

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