

Placements - things to consider

The University has developed a work placement module that can be adopted or adapted by programme teams. The intention is to provide a starting point for those programme areas that have little or no prior experience in organising, implementing and managing placements.

The module has been written generically so that it can be suitable for any discipline or subject area, though it is perfectly permissible that it can be tweaked to make it more subject- or sector-specific (see later section).

The Placement Protocol provides detailed guidance regarding organising, implementing and managing placements (see [Placement Protocol](#) and [Appendices and Forms | UWTSD](#) for the appendices and placement handbook).

This document suggests some *practical* things to consider when inserting a placement in a programme. It complements but does not replicate the Placement Protocol.

What is a placement?

Placements (also known as work experience or internship):

- Work placements provide students with an opportunity for vocational learning and personal development. They can be a particularly valuable way for students to enhance their employability skills in authentic, real-world settings.
- The learner can be considered as student first and employee second, i.e. they came to the placement experience by virtue of their studies. This is distinct from *work-based learning*, where the learner might be considered as employee first and student second, e.g. apprenticeship provision.

Why might a placement be a valuable addition to a programme?

Work placements are important because they provide a number of benefits, including:

- *Real-world experience*: students can apply what they've learned in the classroom or are learning in the workplace in a real-world setting.
- *Skill development*: students can learn skills that aren't taught in the classroom, such as leadership, problem-solving, and time management.
- *Professional insight*: students can get a better idea of what it's like to work in their chosen career.
- *Networking*: they can meet people who could be part of their future professional network and can gain experience in developing a professional network.
- *Increased employability*: they can gain experience that will make them a more competitive candidate for jobs.
- *Career exploration*: students can try out different career paths to find the one that is best for them.
- *Increased confidence*: they can gain confidence in their abilities and feel more prepared to enter the job market.
- *Academic credit*: they can earn academic credit for their work.

- *Broaden knowledge*: they can learn about different industries and sectors.
- *Develop soft skills*: They can develop soft skills like teamwork and working with and negotiating with others.
- *Financial Independence*. Paid placements (ideally) can provide financial independence to students, enabling them to support themselves and even contribute to their families. This financial stability can be particularly beneficial for students who have taken loans to finance their education, allowing them to start repaying their debts promptly.
- *Identify adjustments*: They can identify any reasonable adjustments they may need because of a disability or long-term health condition.
- *Graduates are not always work ready*. According to a Pearson Business School study (2019), universities need to be doing more in preparing graduates for the real world of work. Employers are increasingly looking for applicants who have gained real world experience of the workplace whilst studying for their degree.

Did you know...

- Around 50% of former interns and placement students were hired into graduate jobs by their placement employer in 2022 (Institute of Student Employers, 2024). (A further benefit to this is that it can contribute positively to the discipline's Graduate Outcomes statistics.)
- 61% of HR managers said relevant work experience was more important than the grades achieved by graduates (Personnel Today, 2019)

Challenges and the realities involved in placements

Organising and managing placements is not as easy as it might at first appear. Programme teams are not 'hands off' while a student prepares for and undergoes placement - it is a significant staffing commitment. To ensure a successful placement, things to consider include:

- *Suitable resources* (mainly staffing) and time need to be allocated to managing placements. A Placement Co-Ordinator will be allocated to manage the cohort, and a Placement Tutor will be allocated to mentor each individual student, liaise with the employer, to consider and approve all the paperwork and be the first point of regular contact.
- Staff will need *access to a network of placement providers*. (Students are normally required to source their own placements but in reality, staff normally provide guidance and access to their networks.) Geographical constraints/commuting distances must be considered.
- Many work placement problems arise when the *student's expectations* are not met. This may stem from a mismatch of aims and expectations between employer and student, or it may occur because the student may have an unrealistic picture of life on placement and is therefore likely to be disappointed with the reality. Reflecting on the proposed situation prior to the placement starting is invaluable, as if the student embarks upon the placement with realistic expectations, not only are they less likely

to be disappointed, but also, with this outlook the student is more likely to be able to see and take advantage of the underlying benefits of the situation in addition to the more obvious learning opportunities. It is essential, therefore, that students are given *extensive briefing sessions* prior to commencement of placement. This includes an introduction to the student responsibilities described in the Placement Protocol, a health, safety and wellbeing briefing, professional behaviours and expectations and practical issues like CV-building and interviews, among other things.

- *Administration of placements* is a significant body of work. Placement paperwork is extensive and requires close liaison between the student, the employer, and the programme team prior to approval by the Placement Tutor. This involves individual student risk assessments, an employer health, safety and wellbeing questionnaire, etc. and close tracking to ensure that all paperwork has been completed satisfactorily to ensure that the University has appropriate oversight.
- While on placement, there should be regular *liaison between the student, workplace supervisor* and the placement tutor so that all are aware of progress, and interventions can be taken to stop issues from escalating. These should be scheduled rather than *ad-hoc* and so staff time must be factored in.
- *Detailed records* should be kept that provide an audit trail of events, communications, interventions and any action plans agreed in response to problems (extremely helpful should there be an investigation or appeal).
- *Things do go awry!* Sometimes students display unprofessional behaviour, walk off placements or are dismissed by their employer, students or employers may raise complaints, accidents happen, etc. All of these things must be managed, controlled or mitigated against e.g. via a monitored action plan.

Where to put a placement in the programme structure?

- Consideration needs to be given to *where in the programme structure* a placement is best implemented. Experience has shown that level 4 can be too early for degree students as they haven't had the opportunity to settle fully into HE life or to have learned enough to contribute to a successful placement. Semester 2 of level 5 is ideal in many ways as students tend to have more maturity, knowledge and a professional attitude to get the most out of the placement. If the students aren't fully ready for the placement, there will be dissatisfaction expressed by the student but also the placement providers (employers), which can be harmful to the relationship going forward and might impact the potential for further placements in the future.
- If the placement is a 20 credit module in one semester, students are likely to be studying a further 40 credits of taught modules. Thought must be given to the *programme timetable* to ensure that students have sufficient 'gaps' to allow them to undertake placement alongside their taught studies (typically at least one or two 'free from teaching' day(s) per week).
- Alternatively, if the placement is delivered on its own in a '*block*', consideration must be given to the delivery and the timing of assessment for the remaining modules in that semester.

- If a placement is implemented in semester 2 of level 5, it can be an option against the International Mobility Opportunity module – both have critical reflection on personal development learning outcomes.
- *International Placements* must involve Kath Griffiths in Academic Services as there are extra considerations such as visas, culture and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) advice for travel. International placements are tricky when it comes to timetabling the module as students will not be able to attend on-campus sessions for the remaining taught modules – unless the module is delivered as a block or is of 60 credits, i.e. the whole semester.
- You will need to consider whether the student will require a *Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS)* check if the placement will bring them into contact with children or vulnerable people. The important thing is to consider whether this check is a part of the admissions process or whether it takes place prior to commencement of placement. If undertaken at the admissions stage, you'll need to check that in the typically many intervening months before placement, the student still has no previous convictions. If they do have previous convictions, this has serious implications for whether they can find a suitable placement that doesn't require a DBS - worst case scenario is that they cannot complete the programme. Full information must be given to applicants regarding the timing, requirements and implications of the DBS check.
- *Consider the 'make-up' of the cohort.* Placements work most easily for traditional, full-time undergraduates. If the cohort is largely part-time, mature, with significant other working commitments and caring responsibilities, placement becomes more of a challenge. For this sort of cohort, you may wish to consider other mechanisms to enhance employability skills, e.g. authentic, live, personalised assessments linked to the student's own workplace or one with which they are familiar or an assessment set by a particular employer to address a workplace issue.

Tweaking or expanding the placement provision

As a placement embeds in a programme, and the programme team becomes more experienced, the team may wish to review the module, evolve it, make it more specific or even expand the credit value or number of placements.

It is perfectly permissible to tweak the generic module to be more bespoke to the programme or sector (subject to modification or validation approval). This might involve:

- *Changing the level of study.* For some subject areas, the placement can be an ideal vehicle for data collection for the level 6 Independent Project (subject to the usual ethical approval processes). For this reason, some programme teams may prefer to situate the placement in semester 1 of level 6. Teams must ensure that the vocabulary of the learning outcomes reflects the level of study.
- *Increasing the credit value to create a larger module.* Some employers prefer that students undertake the placement for a longer duration, which may be due to seasonality of the work or staff shortages in the sector. This is typically of benefit to the student. Of course, this requires a review of the module aims and learning outcomes with an increase in the study hours and assessment.

- *Changing the aims/learning outcomes* to be more specific and focused on particular workplace or sector issues. This will also require a review of the assessment methodology.
- *Changing the assessment methodology*, e.g. to include a practical observation of professional practice in the workplace. This will require a review of the aims and learning outcomes to ensure they continue to reflect the intended learning being assessed.
- *Changing the indicative content*. If the programme already has a module that considers things like CV writing, presentations, etc., or these are provided outside of taught modules, e.g. by the Careers Service, these elements can be removed from the placement module. Similarly, coverage of sector-specific skills could be added. This will require a review of the learning hours to ensure sufficient time to deliver all sessions.
- *Changing the allocated study time components*. Some programme teams may wish to increase or reduce the number of placement hours required as relevant to what works for the sector. Similarly, the scheduled learning time might be adjusted (subject to ensuring that the briefings to students remain suitably comprehensive). If either of these are changed, it is likely to impact on the independent learning hours. For credit-bearing modules, the total learning hours must always be 10 hours per credit.
- *Changing the indicative reading list*. Programme teams may wish to add sector-specific texts, journals and other resources.
- *Adding further placements*. Programme teams are not limited in the number of placements permitted in a programme; it is very much as appropriate to the sector. If additional placements are being considered, each extra placement must be different to the others as students need to demonstrate new learning. It's not good practice to just replicate a module as this limits the opportunity for students to progress to their potential rather than rehashing previous learning. Obvious areas to introduce difference include to focus a module's learning outcomes and assessment on a specific and different theme from other placement modules.
- *A unique module code* will need to be assigned to associate the placement module with the particular programme.

As always, consult with your ADQ to discuss any proposals.