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INTEGRATING WORK EXPERIENCE

Integrating Work Experience into the Digital Media Curriculum: A Case Study

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Abstract

We present a case study of the integration of a work experience component into an undergraduate degree in Creative Digital Media. This is a fully accredited academic module that immerses the student in a professional working environment for most of a semester. The aim is to facilitate the development of digital media skills by applying them within the workplace and to leverage the use of work-based learning in order to produce more competent, confident and employable graduates. Our case study is informed firstly by analysis of, and reflection on, our experiences of running the programme since its inception in 2010. We describe the Creative Digital Media degree and how work experience is integrated into it, and also explain our strategies for securing, managing and assessing placements. Secondly we present the results of a substantial survey of the student experience of the process. We report on student attitudes to work experience and analyze the impact that it has on both undergraduate learning and post-graduation employment. Our findings indicate a strong belief within the graduate cohort that work experience is a valuable addition to the undergraduate programme particularly with respect to future employability. We also find that the effectiveness of the placement is closely linked to the type of organisation in which the student is placed. We conclude with some discussion of the results and some recent changes to the work experience process.

Keywords: work experience, creative digital media, work-based learning

Integrating Work Experience into the Digital Media Curriculum

The incorporation of work experience into undergraduate degrees is now commonplace in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This is often encouraged by official educational policy: for example, it has been EU policy since 1995 (“EC”, 1995) and in 1997 the Dearing Report in the UK (Dearing, 1997) strongly recommended it. More recently, the Irish Government’s ICT Skills Action Plan identified the provision of work placement opportunities for students as one of seven strategic priorities for increasing the output of highly-skilled graduates (“ICT Skills”, 2014). The key idea is that there is an important role for a form of learning that takes place outside the walls of the Institution at which the student is registered. As Sheridan and Linehan note (2013) this is not particularly new: the notion of integrating work, and indeed, life experience into education can traced back at least as far as the work of educational reformer John Dewey’s comments that “to learn from life itself and to make the conditions of life such that all will learn in the process of living is the finest product of schooling” (Dewey, 1916, p. 56).

The main motivations usually cited for work experience are improving employability and improving academic performance (Little & Harvey 2006). The view that work placements increase employability seems to be one shared by employers also: for example surveys conducted by Sheridan and Linehan (2013) found broad industry support for the idea, and Jackson (2013) found that work placements contribute significantly across a range of pre-defined employability metrics. Many researchers have also found that students who undertake work experience demonstrate better subsequent academic performance than those who do not (Mandilaras, 2004; Mendez, 2008; Ceschin, Rakowski & De Vere, 2016; Lucas & Tan, 2007; Reddy & Moores, 2012; Hall, Higson & Bullivant, 2009). Duignan (2002) offers a dissenting voice by finding no such correlation, however he also suggests that this might be the result of a

“laissez-faire” approach to curriculum integration. We can also point to other advantages of work experience. Guile and Griffith (2001) suggest that it can potentially bridge the gap between formal and informal learning that was identified as problematic by Bourdieu (1988) and Little and Harvey (2006) focus on the personal development opportunities it offers, specifically with respect to increases in confidence, general competencies and communication skills.

As well as studies that support the case for the benefits of work experience, there also exists a growing body of theoretical literature that seeks to provide a pedagogical grounding (Tynjälä, 2008; Lester & Costley, 2010), and also numerous discipline-specific case studies. Our specific context is that of an undergraduate degree in *creative digital media* that is situated in Ireland and literature that addresses either of these contextual elements is less abundant. The lack of solid case studies from the field of digital media might be a reflection of the relative newness of digital media as a degree discipline, and also the fact that degree courses that lean towards the Arts and the Humanities seem less likely to incorporate work experience¹. An exception to this is Ashton (2015) who looks at work placements within “creative industries” degrees but whose focus is primarily on an innovative assessment method using video-based student reflections. For information about the Irish educational context we will draw on studies by Sheridan and Linehan (2013) and Buckley and El Amoud (2011) both of which provide useful empirical evidence and considered insights.

Context

This case study focuses on the undergraduate degree in Creative Digital Media (CDM) established at ITB in 2008. This is a BA programme for which three years of successful full-time study entitles the student to a Level 7 Ordinary degree, with one further year enabling the award

¹ For example, in Buckley & El Amoud’s study of work experience in the Irish educational system they found that of the 411 courses offering work experience only 18% of these were from Humanities, Arts and Social Science (Buckley & El Amoud, 2011).

of a Level 8 Honours degree. The CDM degree was devised in response to a growing interest in the creative applications of Computing technology and to a growing recognition of the importance of the creative industries in the greater Dublin region². It is oriented towards producing graduates with strong design and creative competencies and it combines this with an emphasis on credible technical and development skills. To this end our students study a range of subjects designed to develop their creative skills (Visual Creativity, Storytelling & Narrative, Design Process & Practice, Visual Design Fundamentals, Brand Identity Design, Critical Theory, Creative Practice) and also a range of subjects that are oriented towards the develop of technical content productions skills (Digital Photography, Web Development, Website Design, Digital Video Techniques, Multimedia Development, Sound Design, App Design & Development). Our graduates compete for roles in areas such as web development, UX design, video production, digital marketing and app development. The degree is semesterised and modularized, with each year divided into two semesters, and each semester requiring the attainment of 30 ECTS credits.

When integrating work experience into an undergraduate degree a number of questions need to be considered. Does the placement take place *in* our *out* of term time? How long is it? Is it compulsory or optional? Does the student receive academic credit? Is it paid or unpaid? The answers to these questions give rise to a number of different models. For example, ‘sandwich’ placements are popular in the UK where the student completes a year-long out-of-term placement. These are typically optional and do not involve academic credit but as Bullock notes (2009), in spite of the obvious advantages, the number of students opting to take one was declining. In the Irish context, Buckley and El Amoud (2011) found that shorter compulsory block-type placements for which the students receive academic credit were far more common.

² Many Government publications have identified Digital Media as a key area of importance for Ireland’s economy: see for example (Forfás, 2006).

They also found that at one stage paid placements were a common enough practice but this declined significantly following the 2008 economic crash.

Our work experience consists of a 3 month term-time compulsory placement that takes place in Semester 2 of Year 3. This is in keeping with the majority of Work Experience programmes in Ireland as Buckley and El Amoud (2011) found that 75% of them positioned it in the third year. In the initial version of our degree the students went on placement for the entire semester and received 30 credits for doing so, with this being evaluated and assessed on a pass/fail basis. In the current version of the degree (which became operational in the 2015/2016 academic year) the students receive 20 credits for a semester-long placement and complete a 10 credit taught module in parallel with this. In addition to this, the placement is now fully graded.

To date, 245 students have been through the CDM Work Experience process. They have worked for a wide variety of organisations around the Dublin region including digital media agencies, web companies, TV/film production houses, and advertising/digital marketing businesses. We can categorise the placement locations into *digital media organisations* and *non-digital media organisations*. Non-digital media organisations would be those whose primary business is not digital media: for example voluntary groups, charities, startups, public sector bodies and so on. Our policy has been to allow these on the basis that many of the learning outcomes of work experience are to do with personal and professional development, and as long as the students are applying their digital media skills then this is meeting the requirements.

Work Experience Process

There are two routes by which a student can be allocated a placement. The first route is a *student-sourced placement* and the second is a *college-sourced placement*. In both cases the students go through an application and interview process and they are supported in doing so by

receiving guidance in the creation of LinkedIn profiles, CVs and online portfolios. While all of these are important, feedback from digital media companies consistently emphasises the importance of a portfolio of work. Students are also assisted in identifying potential placements, and in particular they are assisted in establishing what types of organisations might be most suitable as a means of enhancing and progressing their own personal and career development. Whatever route the student chooses, this is a competitive process, and typically opportunities that are perceived as attractive by the students receive multiple applications.

Management of the work placements is based on a partnership approach that recognises the importance of clear lines of communication between student, college and employer (Sheridan & Linehan, 2013) and also strives to facilitate the potentially different aims and objectives of all three parties in the relationship. The most successful placements are ones where it is mutually understood that this is a learning experience for the student, and in particular where the boundaries of that learning, and how it is to be achieved, are well mapped out in advance. Discussions to this end are had between all three parties and before the placement is approved a document detailing this, and other practical matters, is produced and signed by all.

During the period covered by this study, the Work Experience was assessed on a pass/fail basis, but nevertheless it was felt that a rigorous and carefully thought out means of assessment was still critical. Ruth Helyer, following Schon (1983), argues for the role of reflection as a means of assessment in any form of work-based learning (Helyer, 2015). Schon identified the importance of the *reflective practitioner*; meaning an individual who is capable of reflecting on their own experience in order to engage in a continuous process of personal and professional development. Our approach draws on this in the belief that it is only by critically examining their own activities and experiences while on placement that they can effectively consolidate their

learning. To this end, all of the assessment components are designed with this sort of reflection at their core. The students are therefore required to produce weekly *reflective journals* and both a *report* and a *portfolio* of work at the end of the process. They are also interviewed by the Work Placement Coordinator during a site visit and deliver a presentation to the class.

Survey Results

The purpose of this survey was to investigate what impact the placements are having on both undergraduate learning and post-graduation employment. We were also interested in trying to ascertain what sorts of placement were perceived by the students to be the most successful and to gauge overall satisfaction with the process. All 194 former students who completed their work placements in years up to 2015 were invited to complete it and 108 responses were received. The survey results indicate a high level of satisfaction with the process, with the majority of graduates perceiving it to have enhanced their undergraduate learning and to have improved their employability. While we must be mindful that students with positive perceptions might have been more likely to complete the survey nevertheless, the results, which we will now look at in more detail, provide strong evidence for the effectiveness of the placement.

Firstly, it is useful to get a picture of what type of work placements the students are doing. Students were asked to categorise their placement according to whether it was a digital media organization or not and also according to its size. The results show that 69% of respondents did their placement with a digital media organization and almost 70% of placement organisations had between 3 and 30 employees. The most common types of business were web design/development, digital marketing, visual design, video production and online media. Respondents were asked to rate their experience and the results are shown in Figure 1.

Excellent	51	48.57%
Good	36	34.29%
Fair	12	11.43%
Poor	6	5.7%

Figure.1 Rating of overall quality of experience while on placement (105 respondents)

As the above results show, 83% of respondents rated their experience as good to excellent. More specific questions were then used to try and tease out the extent to which the students felt that the placement contributed to (a) their skills development and (b) their personal development. Consistent results were obtained here also with 85% responding that the placements contributed either “very much” or “to a reasonable extent” to their skills development and 89% feeling the same with respect to the contribution to personal development. Furthermore, 74% agreed that the placement enhanced undergraduate teaching. This, while still very positive, is a slightly lower figure than the others and might indicate that more work needs to be done to connect work experience to the rest of the curriculum, an issue that has been highlighted before in research such as (Guile & Griffith, 2001) and (Tynjälä, 2008).

As mentioned previously, many researchers have reported increased academic performance among students who have undertaken work placements. This is harder to establish in our case as we do not have a control group of students who have *not* taken work placements, however we can investigate whether there is any correlation between the *type* of work placement undertaken and the results achieved. What we found is that size of placement organization does not seem to matter but the type definitely does, with students who undertook placements in digital media companies achieving significantly better final degree outcomes than those who did

not. To establish this we looked at the percentage of students who achieved higher degrees (a first or a higher second class) as opposed to those who achieved lower degrees (a lower second class or a pass) and found that while 70% of students who did placement in digital media companies achieved higher degrees, only 47% of the other group did.

	<i>Higher</i>	<i>Lower</i>
<i>Digital Media Placement</i>	70%	24%
<i>Non Digital Media Placement</i>	47%	44%

Figure 2. Final degree outcomes (excluding students who did not complete)

We also set out to investigate the impact of Work Experience on employability. One measure of this would be whether the work placement organisations themselves saw fit to subsequently employ the students so the survey asked a general question about current employment status but also a more specific question about any further employment with the placement organisation. We found that 42% of the respondents were now in full time employment in digital media with a further 20% either self-employed or doing part-time work in the field. 10% were engaged in either graduate internships or further study, 17% were working in a different area, and 11% reported being presently unemployed. We found a strong willingness among the placement organisations to subsequently employ our students. 12% of the graduates were either now working full time for their placement organisation or had done so at some point in the past. Given the fluid nature of the industry and the prevalence of small emerging businesses this is encouraging. Additionally, a further 35% reported doing part-time or contract work of some kind with them and a further 9% reported having been offered work at some point. In summary, this means that over half of our students have either done, or been offered, paid employment of some kind with their placement organisation, suggesting that perceived employability on the part of the employers is good. In terms of student perception, 57% agreed

that the placement helped them secure employment after graduation, 28% said that it did not, with the remaining 15% selecting “Don’t Know”. Respondents were invited to elaborate on this and majority of them cited either “contacts” (either directly with the company or with people they networked with while on placement) or “experience” (tangible experience to point to on a CV, a portfolio, or in an interview) as the key factors.

It is also instructive to look at potential correlation between the type of work placement and perceived employability benefits. We found that 75% of those placed in digital media companies believed that it enhanced their employment prospects but the equivalent for the other group was a much lower figure of 34%. Given that a major employment factor cited by students was developing contacts while on placement it is perhaps not so surprising that placements that take place outside of the digital media sector per se are not perceived as so successful in this respect. However, it should be noted that about 2/3 of the other group still rated the overall experience as good or excellent, which suggests that they see other valuable benefits.

Discussion and Conclusion

We have described the integration of a semester-long Work Experience module into an undergraduate digital media degree and found that the perceived benefits, in terms of enhanced undergraduate learning and employability, are good. One of the difficulties of incorporating work experience into undergraduate studies is the problem of finding enough placements. This problem is particularly acute in contexts of rising student numbers. Digital media is somewhat fortunate in this regard however as placements can be sourced not just in digital media companies but also in non-digital media organisations who can make use of someone with digital media skills. Given that many of the learning outcomes are to do with professional and personal development and given that the students will still be putting their skills to use, this is an option

that we have, until recently, considered acceptable. However, our survey indicates that the outcomes from these sorts of placements are not as good. We see this is an example of the difference between what Guile and Griffith (2000) call knowledge-rich and knowledge-poor organisations and conclude that knowledge-rich ones are essential for effective placements.

The difficulty of sourcing enough placements in knowledge-rich organisations remains however, and with this in mind we introduced a change in 2016 which firstly made the Work Experience optional rather than compulsory, and secondly insisted that only placements in digital media companies (or at least companies with some significant digital media expertise) would be acceptable. We also introduced a new Professional Project module for students who do not opt for Work Experience. This is a mechanism to allow these students to work on projects specified by client organisations or individuals and thereby gain some of the same personal and professional competencies normally associated with Work Experience. This also facilitates community engagement for ITB. These students also undertake one extra academic module in order to make up the required credits. In the first iteration of this model, 30 students did Work Experience and 22 did Professional Project. Future work will be needed to assess the impact.

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