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Beyond Big Business. Opportunities and Challenges for Irish HEIs in Engaging with Family Businesses and Community & Voluntary Groups through the Student Work Placement Process

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BEYOND BIG BUSINESS

Opportunities and Challenges for Irish HEIs in Engaging with Family Businesses and Community & Voluntary Groups through the Student Work Placement Process

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Higher Education Authority
An tÚdarás um Ard-Oideachas

Roadmap for Employment
– Academic Partnerships

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1 Introduction

Work placement programmes[2] have been incorporated into undergraduate courses in many higher education institutions (HEIs) around the world for countless decades. For example, in the home institution of this paper's authors, work placement has featured in academic courses since as far back as the mid-nineteenth century when medical teaching commenced in that particular university. Although initially work placement was largely confined to the realm of clinical courses such as medicine and nursing in many HEIs, more recently it has been extended across most academic disciplines. This development is partly due to the increasing focus on personal transferable skills by universities (Albrecht and Sack 2000). In the first ever assessment of work placement practice in Irish HEIs, Buckley and El Amoud (2010) identified 411 undergraduate courses that included a work placement element among twenty-three Irish HEIs, with almost 11,000 students undertaking placement in non-clinical programmes on an annual basis. This groundbreaking research then formed the basis for the *Roadmap for Employment Academic Partnerships* (REAP) project's 2011 report on 'Work Placement in Third Level Programmes.' This report presented the results of empirical research conducted with the three stakeholders involved in the work placement experience — HEIs, employers, and students — in order to ascertain the current state of work placement provision in Ireland. Although several concerns were raised by this research regarding the operation of the placement process, overall, the findings suggested that:

> HEIs, employers and students all agree that work placements make a valuable contribution to the third-level educational experience. In particular, work placements were considered to enhance the employability prospects of future graduates as the industry competences gained through informal learning in the workplace make individuals more employment ready (REAP, 2011:5).

However, while the value of the work placement experience has become more evident as a result of this research, due to the economic downturn in recent years, it has become somewhat more difficult for work placement practitioners in Irish HEIs to secure placements

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[2] The definition of work placement used in the report 'Work Placement in Third Level Programmes' (REAP, 2011:9) will be adopted for the purpose of this paper: 'work placement is taken to mean a work context for intentional learning that is relevant to the aims and intended learning outcomes of a higher education programme or module'.

for the tens of thousands of students who undertake work placements as part of their third-level programmes on an annual basis. Indeed, the REAP project report expressed this concern in 2011, stating that 'there are not enough work experience placements available to meet the growing demand from students… For education institutions, this means that finding work experience for students can often be time-consuming, difficult, and not always successful' (REAP, 2011:52). Some employers who would have been the 'traditional' placement partners of HEIs (multinational companies, public sector bodies, etc.) have now had to scale down the number of positions that they can provide to students. Nonetheless, as work placement is now a compulsory element of many third level programmes, placement opportunities must be provided for relevant students. One way to overcome this shortfall is to develop new partnerships with organisations who may not traditionally have been seen as within the reach of HEIs, but which are abundant in Ireland. Indeed, organisations such as family businesses and community and voluntary groups are bountiful within almost every community in Ireland, and are most certainly within the orbit of every HEI in Ireland.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the opportunities and challenges for Irish HEIs in engaging with these organisations through the student work placement process. While a substantial amount of valuable work has already been carried out by the REAP project in ascertaining the current state of work placement provision in Ireland and developing a general set of guidelines for good practice in placement for HEIs, employers and students, there is an opportunity to take this body of work a step further. Indeed, the main aim of this report is to present a best practice model for engagement on work placement between Irish HEIs and specific types of organisations, namely family businesses and community and voluntary groups, as a one-size-fits-all approach may not necessarily be the best way to deal with these organisations. The key questions this work will therefore address include how can HEIs reach these organisations and establish lasting partnerships with them? What kind of practical difficulties exist in this type of engagement? How can these obstacles be overcome?

The paper will begin with a contextual overview of family businesses and community and voluntary groups in Ireland in order to convey the span of these organisations within the country and the vast experience they have to offer work placement students. An outline of the

results of a recent survey carried out by this research team, which examined the views of work placement practitioners in Irish HEIs, as well as those of representatives from family businesses, and those from community and voluntary groups, will then be presented. This paper will subsequently attempt to analyse the key challenges raised by this research, before presenting our conclusions and recommendations for best practice in this field. It is hoped that this report will be widely used as a support tool by HEIs in engaging with family businesses and community and voluntary groups in the placement process and that by doing so, placement will become a more straightforward and appealing form of engagement to these organisations.

2 Contextual Overview

2.1 Family Businesses

Firstly, in terms of defining family businesses, this paper will adhere to the definition offered by the Irish Central Statistics Office (CSO) and cited in Martin (2008:2), which defines an enterprise as a family-owned business if it meets one or more of the following conditions:

- An enterprise where one family holds more than 50% of the voting shares;
- A family supplies a significant proportion of the enterprises senior management and is effectively controlling the business;
- An enterprise where there is evidence of more than one generation working in the business;
- An enterprise that is influenced by a family or a family relationship and that perceives itself to be a family business.

In terms of the extent of family businesses in the Irish economy, Minister for Small Business, John Perry T.D. (2012), recently stated that family-owned enterprises are estimated to account for up to 75 per cent of all enterprises in Ireland and for half of the employment in the private sector. Minister Perry (2012) attributed the importance of family businesses to both the Irish and European economies to several key factors: 'Productivity, competitiveness, job creation and sustainability are part of their DNA … Not only are family businesses the natural incubators of an entrepreneurial culture, they foster the next generation of European entrepreneurs.' A recent PricewaterhouseCoopers (2012:3) survey of Irish family business also noted the importance of family businesses to Ireland's economic recovery: Irish family

firms have ambitious growth plans with over three-quarters of survey respondents (77%) planning sales growth over the next five years. Half of responding Irish family businesses are also planning export growth (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2012:3). On average, they expect that over a quarter (26%) of their sales in the next five years will be derived from exports (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2012:3). In addition, an overwhelming majority (90%) of Irish family businesses surveyed reported to feeling a sense of responsibility to supporting employment in their area and 83 per cent said they would make every effort to retain staff, even in the bad times (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2012:6).

2.2   *Community and Voluntary Groups*

This paper adopts the following working definition of the community and voluntary sector as proposed in recent research commissioned by the national representative body for this sector, *The Wheel*, whereby community and voluntary groups are defined as 'organisations which are independently governed and are not-for-profit' (RSM McClure Watters, 2012: 21). These types of groups are widespread across the country and offer a very significant contribution to Irish society. According to *The Wheel* (2012a), approximately 'two-thirds of Irish adults (over two million people) engage annually in the social, cultural and humanitarian activities offered by our 19,000 community and voluntary organisations.' The sector contributes over €2.5 billion to the Irish economy each year and employs over 63,000 full and part-time staff (The Wheel, 2012a). These organisations are active at every level of society, and they play an essential role in delivering social and public services, such as healthcare, education, housing, poverty relief, the arts, sport and the protection of our environment and heritage (The Wheel, 2012b).

3   Methodology

In order to try and establish a representative national view on this topic, the project team based in University College Cork (UCC) collaborated with the newly established Work Placement Committee of the *Association of Higher Education Careers Services* (AHECS), and in particular, representatives from National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG), National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NUIM), University of Limerick (UL), Dundalk Institute of Technology (DKIT), Dun Laoighre Institute of Art, Design and Technology

(IADT), and Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT). Firstly, these partners accumulated their own institutions' experience of engaging with family businesses and civic and community groups which they then presented at a project workshop in early 2012. These views formed the basis of initial discussions on the topic and contributed to the design of two surveys to be used by the project team in an effort to try and capture the perspectives of placement practitioners, and representatives from family businesses and community and voluntary groups (see appendix 1). These surveys were promoted by both the project team and project partners and contributed a substantial amount of research to this paper. Once the survey results were compiled, a second workshop was held in autumn 2012 to discuss issues arising from the survey responses and to attempt to contribute to best practise in this field. The following pages therefore present a summary of these findings.

4   Survey Results

4.1   Survey for Work Placement Practitioners: Contextual Overview

The first project survey devised by the team was sent to placement practitioners in all Universities and Institutes of Technology around the country. Responses were received from twenty-nine practitioners representing fourteen HEIs based in ten counties across the state. These practitioners are responsible for placing approximately 5,000 students on an annual basis. These students come from approximately 150 third level courses spanning the disciplines of Humanities, Engineering, IT, Science, Business, Health and Education. Their placements last an average of four months, but can be as little as four weeks and as much as ten months. The majority of these placements are unpaid (59 per cent), but almost 41 per cent of students do receive some form of payment for placement. In terms of the spread of host organisations used by these placement practitioners, Figure 1 overleaf details the percentage of placements occurring in big business (multinational companies, large companies, etc.); small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs); family businesses; and community and voluntary groups.

Figure 1: Distribution of Placements Per Partner Organisations
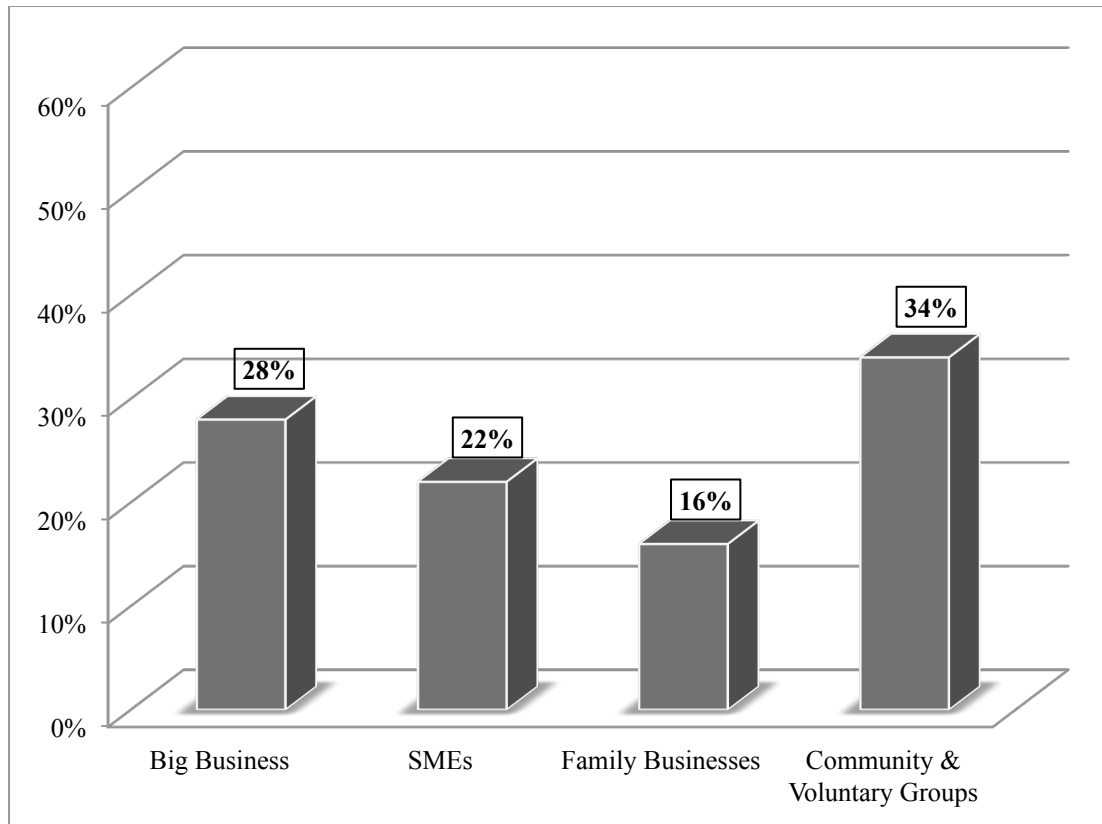
Placement practitioners were also asked whether they considered there to be a difference between placements in family businesses and community and voluntary groups, and the more traditional placement partners in big business and SMEs. Of those who responded to this question, an overwhelming 88 per cent of practitioners did acknowledge a difference with these types of employer organisations. In explaining their response, placement practitioners firstly highlighted the more varied experience students are exposed to in family businesses and community and voluntary groups:

- Family Business give more hands on experience and expose students to a variety of the softer learning outcomes;

- The experience may be more varied in the smaller organisations and the student may be exposed to more aspects of running a business;

- Students working in smaller organisations receive a broad placement experience as they are not pigeon-holed in to one narrow role;

- They give students good broad experience of overall operations and the owner/manager is often hands on in ensuring the student gets most out of the experience and that the employer gets the most out of the student. They often give scope to the student to be creative in the workplace as they are not 'boxed

in' to a role, as they may be in a larger organisation where there role is very closely defined. This can benefit the student and the employer.

They also outlined the different placement structures in place in these employer organisations:

- Traditional placement partners tend to have a more formal work placement module with induction, mentors, etc.;

- We have to adjust our process for these employers – they can't deal with the rules and procedures that big industry can;

- The structures are not as formal in family businesses/community work as larger organisations;

- The more traditional partners tend to have a placement system/methodology, whereas the smaller organisations are more organic and may not be experienced in mentoring, etc.;

- There can be more 'handholding' involved with family businesses as they may not be used to the placement process;

- Larger firms may be more structured, have a specific structured programme that the students follow, and are more likely to take students for back to back placements year after year.

Placement practitioners also explained that often students can have a greater sense of achievement upon completing work placements in family businesses and community and voluntary groups:

- The placements are often personally rewarding for students because they have directly helped a business/group;

- Some of the students gained very good experience, some gained a real insight into the drive and passion that is involved in a family business and really enjoyed contributing to the family business. They could see the impact first hand and found that they were making a difference;

- Students who were placed with family businesses were shown greater appreciation and they were acknowledged more for the contribution they had given. Again with community and voluntary groups, students spoke about how good it made them feel that they contributed to a worthwhile project. They may not have been made paid or paid very little put this was not a major concern.

Practitioners were then asked to identify what level of repeat business that they have managed to attract with all their placement partners, as can be seen in Figure 2 overleaf.

Figure 2: Repeat Business Secured by Placement Practitioners
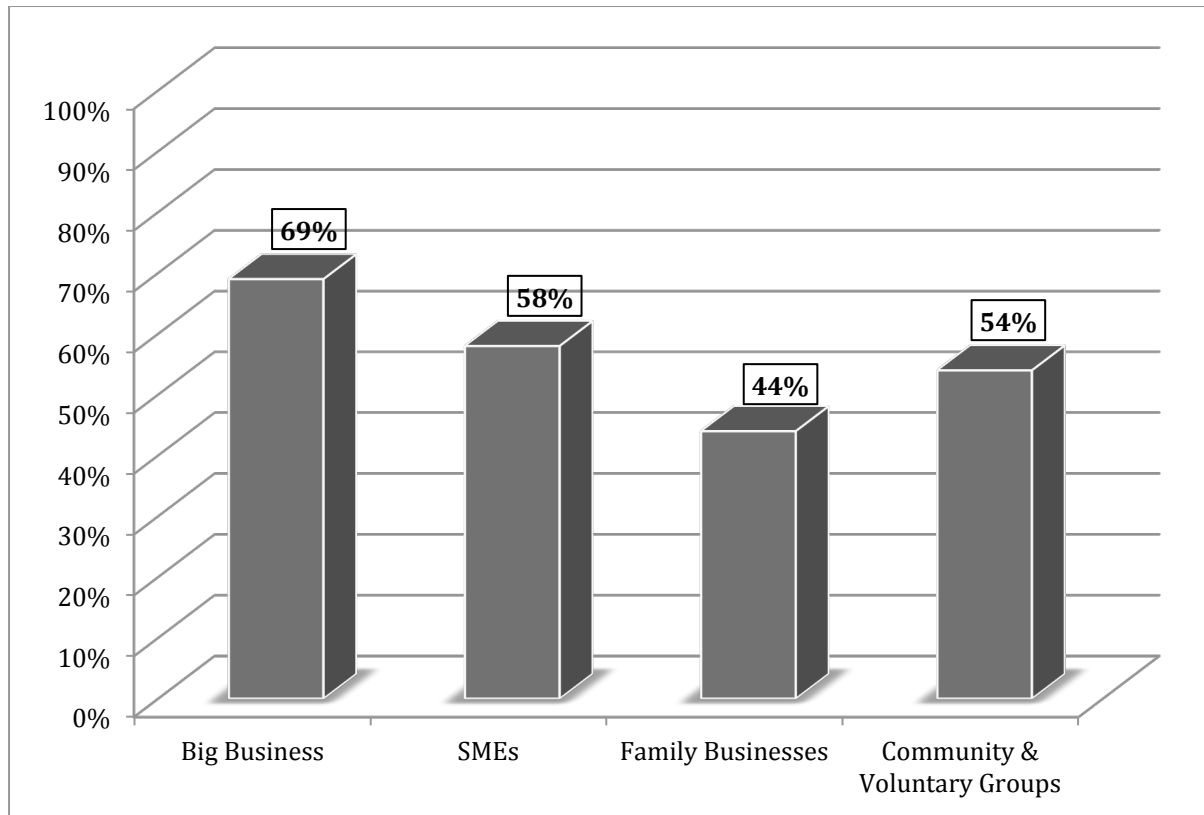
Although the level of repeat business placement practitioners manage to secure is typically around 50 per cent in all categories, it is still somewhat lower in family businesses and community and voluntary groups than it is in big business and SMEs.

4.2 Survey for Family Businesses and Community and Voluntary Groups: Contextual Overview

The second survey designed by the project team was sent to family businesses and community and voluntary groups around the country. Fifteen responses were received from family businesses ranging from artisan food producers to manufacturers and service providers. Eighteen responses were received from community and voluntary groups dealing with issues including youth work, domestic violence, cancer support and education. The average number of staff members employed by all of these businesses and groups is thirty-one, but ranges from 1-250 staff. The average number of volunteers working with these organisations is 140, but again ranges from 2-3,000 volunteers. In terms of their past

experience with the work placement process, 75 per cent of respondents had been previously asked to take a student on work placement, and were approached by students themselves in 71 per cent of cases; a placement practitioner in a HEI in 62 per cent of cases; a lecturer in a HEI in 48 per cent of cases; and a friend/neighbour/acquaintance in 24 per cent of cases. In addition, 28 per cent of respondents had themselves approached a HEI looking for a work placement student. In total, 55 per cent of respondents had hosted a work placement student in the past. With regard to payment, 41 per cent of respondents reported no payment to the student, a further 41 per cent offered the student a token payment / gift / travel expenses, while 18 per cent of respondents paid the student the minimum wage or above. These figures are interesting as they, to some extent, conflict with the responses of the placement practitioners who reported that 59 per cent of placements are unpaid, while 41 per cent of students receive some form of payment. Here, the employer responses state that 41 per cent of placements are unpaid, while 59 per cent of placement students receive some form of payment.

As part of the survey, these employer organisations were also asked to rate the extent of their understanding of work placement, as can be seen in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Employer Organisations' Understanding of Work Placement
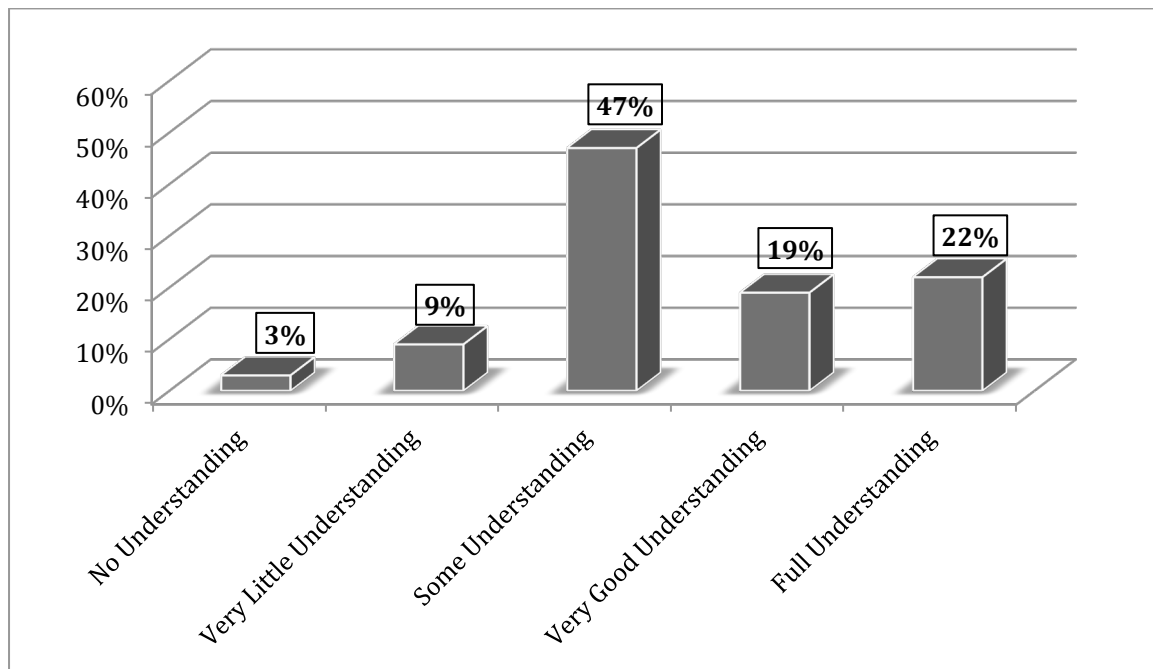
The results portrayed in this graph initially appear to be somewhat worrisome as less than half of those surveyed rate their understanding of work placement as 'very good' to 'full understanding'. However, of those employer organisations who rated their understanding of work placement as 'no understanding' or 'very little understanding', none of them had previously participated in the work placement process, so this lack of understanding is reasonable. Conversely, however, of the employer organisations who reported that they had only 'some understanding' of the placement process, 80 per cent had engaged in work placement in the past. When the survey asked respondents to briefly outline their understanding of work placement, responses included the following from those who reported that they had 'some understanding' of work placement:

- Giving students a chance to experience and apply their learning in real life;

- To allow a student to gain a better understanding of the area they are studying in a real live setting. This will allow the student to understand the different elements of a business, how to act in a professional manner and to gain some experience that will allow the student to gain employment post-graduation. For the employer, it is an opportunity to establish a relationship with a higher education authority and potentially recruit students in the future;

- Opportunity for student to gain practical experience in the area in which they are studying;

- Students shadow other employees, make an active contribution to the organisation, act almost as consultants in bringing fresh ideas to the organisation;

- Students are placed in a role within a company and shadow a mentor, and possibly do some work themselves after an initial introduction period.

Some of the respondents who said that they had a 'very good understanding' of placement described it as follows:

- It is an opportunity for students to get first-hand experience, to use and develop their skills. For the Sponsor it provides us with the extra support and help to our staff;

- To allow students a chance to experience reality rather than theory.

Finally, several of the respondents who claimed to have a 'full understanding' of placement defined it as follows:

- To offer students the opportunity to develop and define for themselves their employment competencies and skills;

- An opportunity for students to experience the work environment, practice their learning and gain from 'on-the-job' training.

The first non-contextual line of questioning in both surveys focused on the motivation and reasons for engaging (or not as the case may be) in the placement process, i.e. placement practitioners' reasons for engaging (or not) with both family businesses and community and voluntary groups; and the reasons supplied by family businesses and community and voluntary group themselves for their own level of engagement in work placement. Figure 4 below depicts the reasons supplied by the placement practitioners for engaging, or not as the case may be, with family businesses.

Figure 4: Work Placement Practitioners Reasons for (Not) Engaging with Family Businesses
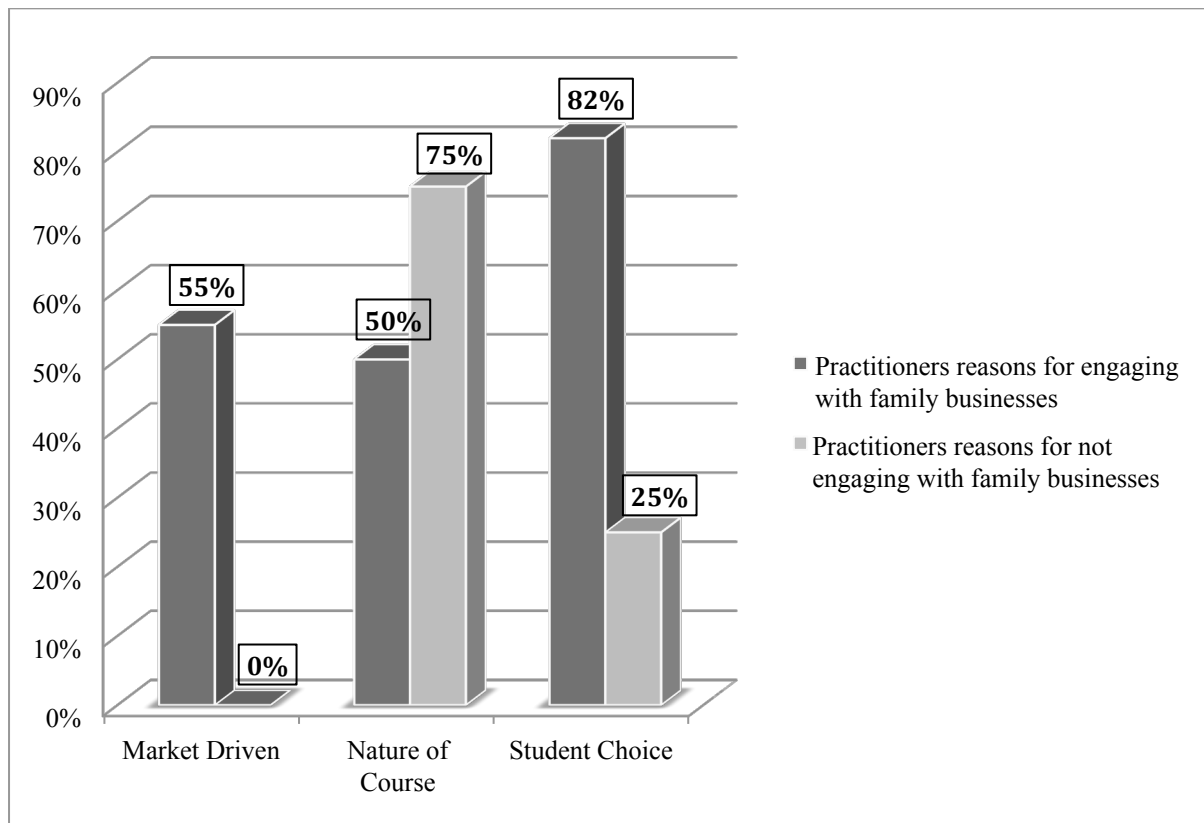
This chart demonstrates the desire of students to engage with family businesses for their work placement, as this is the top reason provided by placement practitioners to explain why they engage with family businesses. The market also plays an important role in placement practitioners' reasoning for this type of engagement. However, it is quite significant that the top reason chosen by placement practitioners to explain why they do not engage with family

businesses in the placement process is due to the nature of the course students are following. This would suggest that placement practitioners are very much open and committed to engaging with family businesses in the placement process where possible.

Figure 5 below depicts the reasons supplied by the placement practitioners for engaging (or not) with community and voluntary groups.

Figure 5: Work Placement Practitioners Reasons for (Not) Engaging with Community and Voluntary Groups
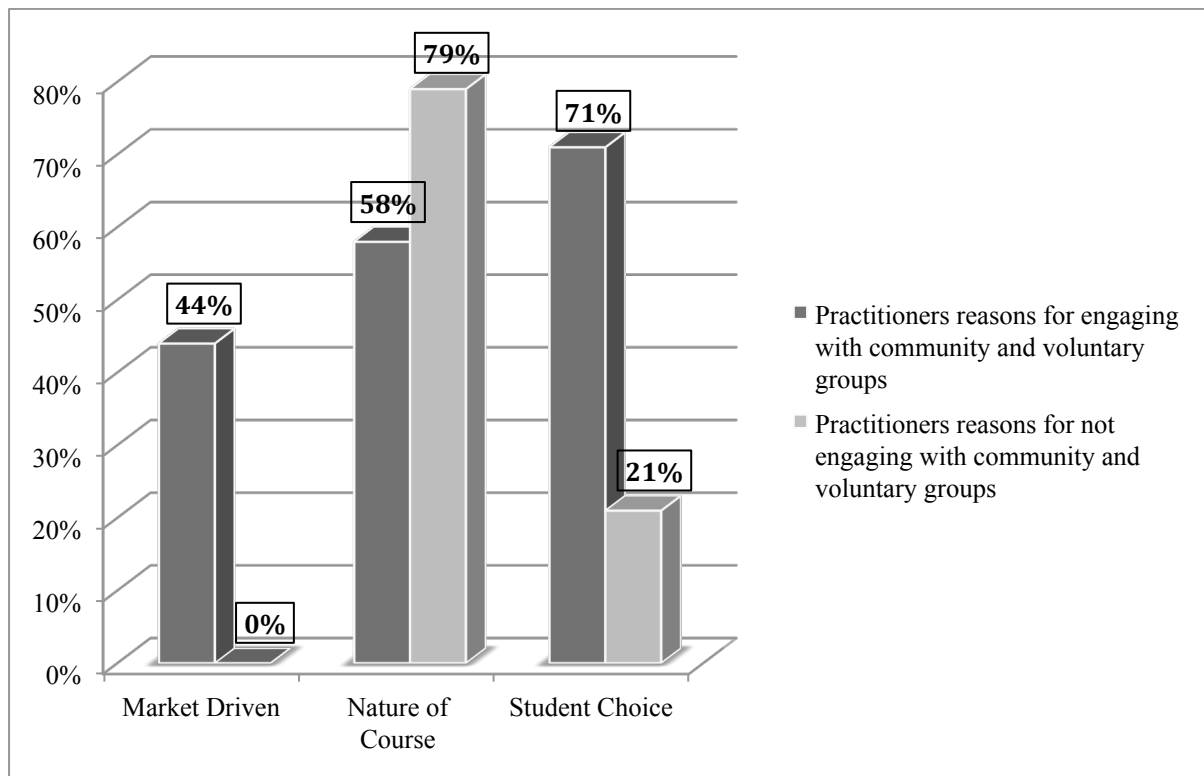
For a second time, the top reason for placement practitioners engaging with community and voluntary groups as work placement partners is student choice. The nature of the course becomes more important as a reason for engaging with these types of organisations than it did with family businesses. This is perhaps due to the number of courses with a social and community focus. Once again, the top reason chosen by placement practitioners to explain why they do not engage with community and voluntary groups in the placement process is due to the nature of the course students are following. This suggests that placement

practitioners are also very much open and committed to engaging with community and voluntary groups in the placement process where possible.

Figure 6 below presents the opinions of the family businesses and community and voluntary groups surveyed on this matter. Their responses were quite similar to those collected for the REAP report 'Work Placement in Third Level Programmes' which summarised the motivations for employers to be involved in placement as:

- A useful recruitment tool;
- Corporate responsibility;
- New skills and energy from students;
- Developing research links with the HEI (REAP, 2011:34).

Figure 6: Reasons Supplied by Family Businesses and Community and Voluntary Groups for Engaging in Work Placement
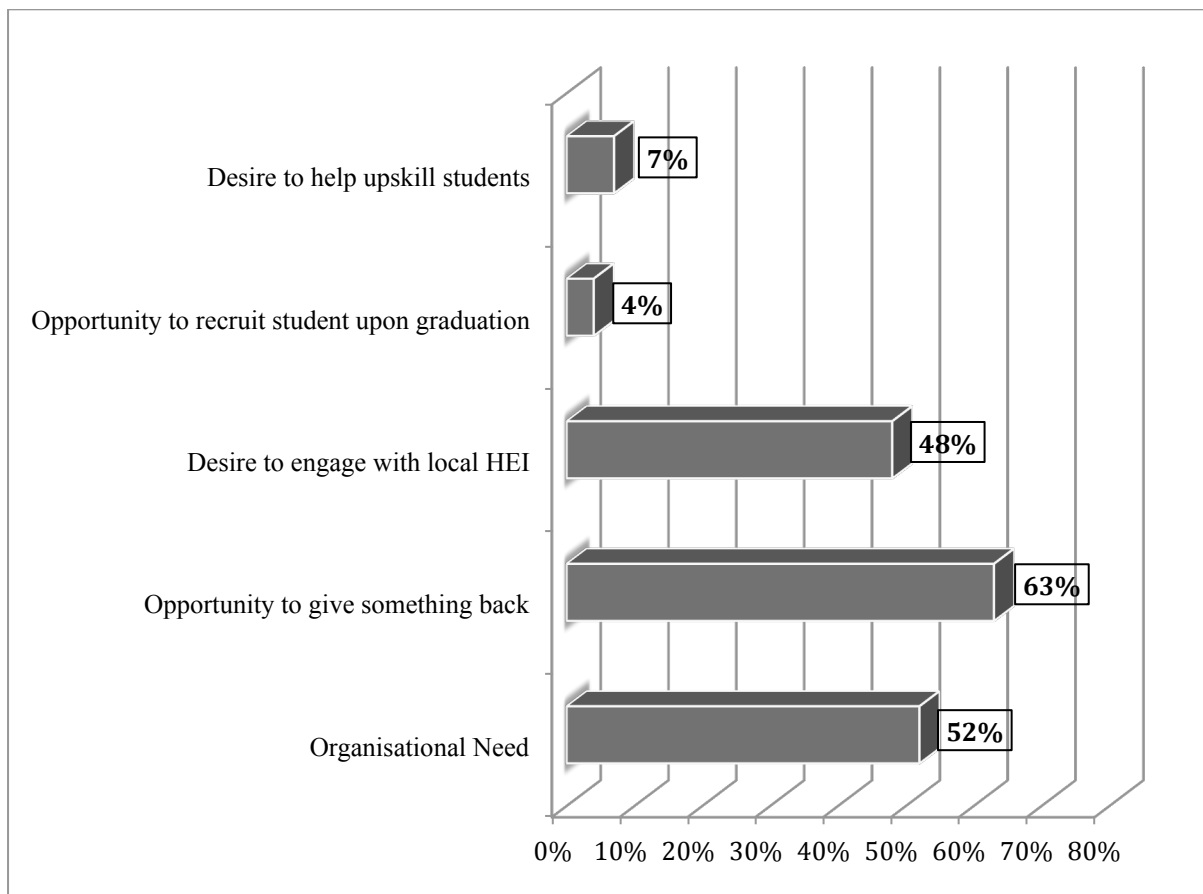
The top reason for engaging in work placement appears to be linked with a sense of corporate social responsibility, as both family businesses and community and voluntary groups see work placement as an opportunity to give something back to the community. This finding correlates with a recent PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) survey which found that 'an overwhelming majority (90%) of Irish family businesses surveyed reported to feeling a sense of responsibility to supporting employment in their area' (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2012:6). Figure 6 also demonstrates that both family businesses and community and voluntary groups are motivated by the more practical reason of organisational need, but that they are also looking for a means of engaging with their local HEI.

Figure 7 overleaf outlines the reasons supplied by family businesses and community and voluntary groups for turning down work placement opportunities, as well as the reasons supplied by placement practitioners as to why they were turned down by family businesses and community voluntary groups in the past when seeking work placements for their students.

Figure 7: Reasons for Turning Down Work Placement Opportunities
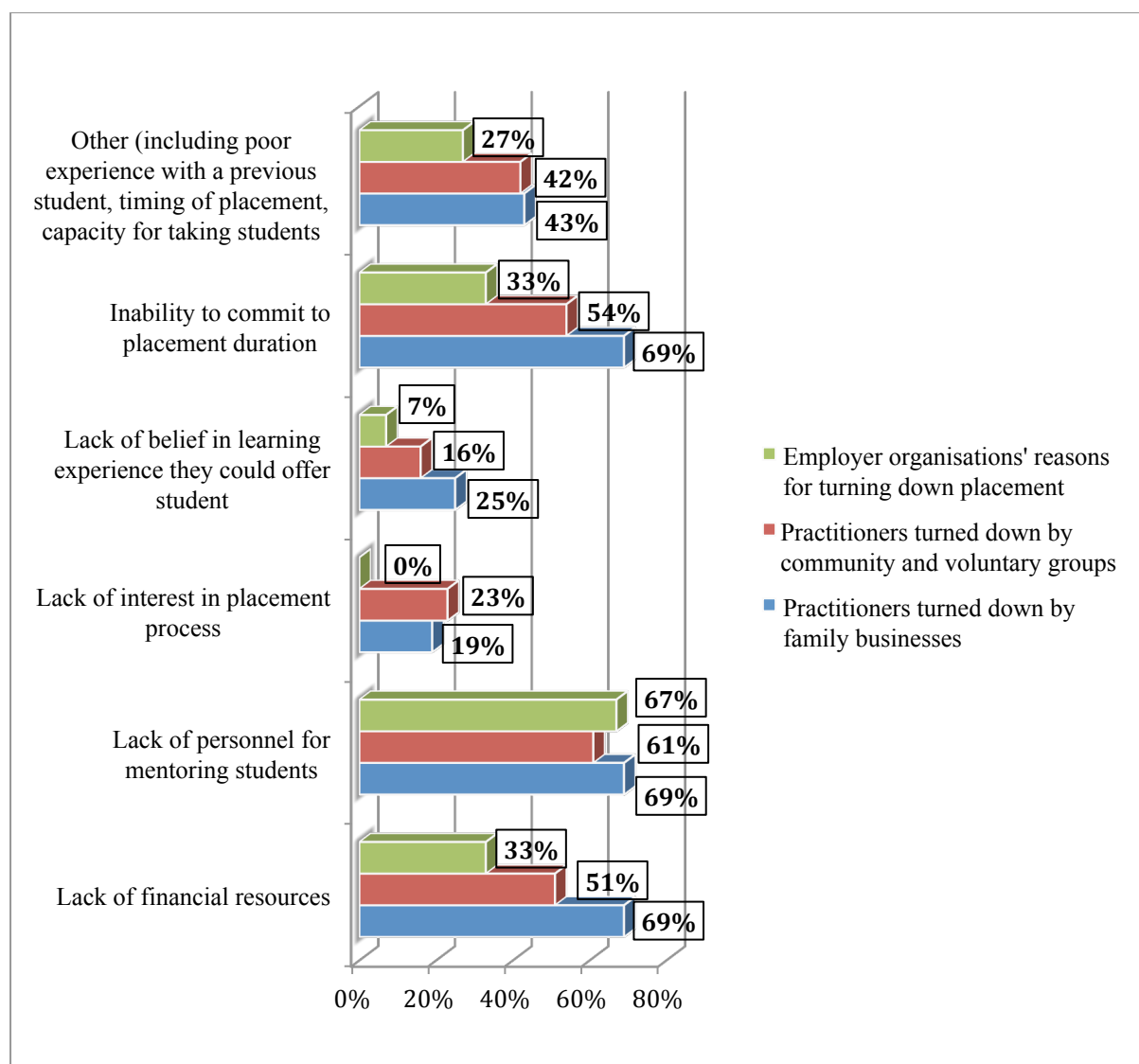
In terms of a 'lack of personnel for mentoring students', this was the most significant issue cited in all categories. 'A lack of financial resources' and an 'inability to commit to the placement duration' was also reported quite often by placement practitioners who had been rejected by both types of employer organisations; and the employer organisations themselves also mentioned these issues quite frequently. 'A lack of belief in the learning experience that could be offered to students' was reported by a small number of practitioners who had approached family businesses (25%) and community and voluntary groups (16%), while only 7 per cent of the organisations themselves who were surveyed mentioned this as an issue. It is

interesting to highlight that there was a slight perception among placement practitioners that both family businesses (19%) and community and voluntary groups (23%) had 'a lack of interest in the placement process', although this option was chosen by none of the employer organisations surveyed here, which again suggests that there is a willingness on the part of both family businesses and community and voluntary groups to engage in the work placement process where possible. Finally, a number of respondents (43% of practitioners who had tried to engage with family businesses, 42% or practitioners who had tried to engage with community and voluntary groups, and 27% of employer organisations) also mentioned a few 'other' reasons for turning down this engagement, including poor experience with a previous work placement student, an issue with the timing of work placement and capacity for taking a number of work placement students.

4.4   Feedback on Work Placement Experience

The second area of focus for the project surveys centred on feedback on the placement experience. Firstly, work placement practitioners were asked, based on their experience, to identify students' typical perceptions of work placement in both family businesses and community and voluntary groups, as can be seen in tables 1 and 2 below.

4.4.1   Table 1: Student Perceptions of Work Placement in Family Businesses, According to Placement Practitioners

|	**Positive Perceptions**	**Negative Perceptions**
Working Environment	• Smaller and less intimidating • Atmosphere more relaxed	• Students often worried that they won't fit into a family business • Students feel suffocated and micro-managed sometimes
Learning Opportunity	• Unique opportunity to develop skills • Great variety – exposure to all areas of business • Opportunity to get broad insight into workings of a business	• Less beneficial for CV and career • Not as attractive as 'big name' employers • Fear family business is too small for student to gain any value from placement • Sometimes students are given menial tasks as owner won't leave go of the reins
Style of Placement	• Very hands on • Students sometimes given significant responsibility	• Lack of structured training and mentoring as in bigger organisations

4.4.2   Table 2: Student Perceptions of Work Placement in Community and Voluntary Groups, According to Placement Practitioners

	Positive Perceptions	**Negative Perceptions**
Learning Opportunity	• Quality unique experience • Valuable and worthwhile experience • Good networking opportunity • Opens up a new outlook as students engage in new experiences	• Students feel placement is not particularly relevant to their degree and career aims • Not very stimulating but easy placement • Students feel that they should be getting exposure with more renowned companies • Sometimes students are given menial tasks as there is an expectation for students to get their hands dirty
Style of Placement	• Very hands on • Students sometimes given significant responsibility • Opportunity for students to give something back	• Structure and mentoring support less developed than in bigger organisations

As can be seen above, in the case of work placements in both family businesses and community and voluntary groups, placement practitioners reported that students are concerned that placements in these types of organisations will not be as beneficial for their CV and career prospects in the long-run as a placement with a more well-known company. Placement practitioners also reported that students are worried that they will have to contend with a less developed structure and mentoring support system than perhaps they would experience in larger organisations. However, on the positive side, placement practitioners reported that students view placements in family businesses and community and voluntary groups as unique opportunities where they can gain exposure to a wide variety of different elements of the organisations. They also view these placements as somewhat more hands on and feel that they would perhaps be given more responsibility in these organisations than in bigger companies. One practitioner remarked that 'students get huge exposure, networking and experience, but they have to stick with it for the duration. It's usually only at the end of placement that students say it's worth it!'

Placement practitioners were then asked, according to the post-placement feedback they receive from students, how students typically rate the quality of their placement experience in a variety of organisations, as per Figure 8 overleaf.

Figure 8: Students' Post-Placement Ratings of Placement Experience, According to Placement Practitioners
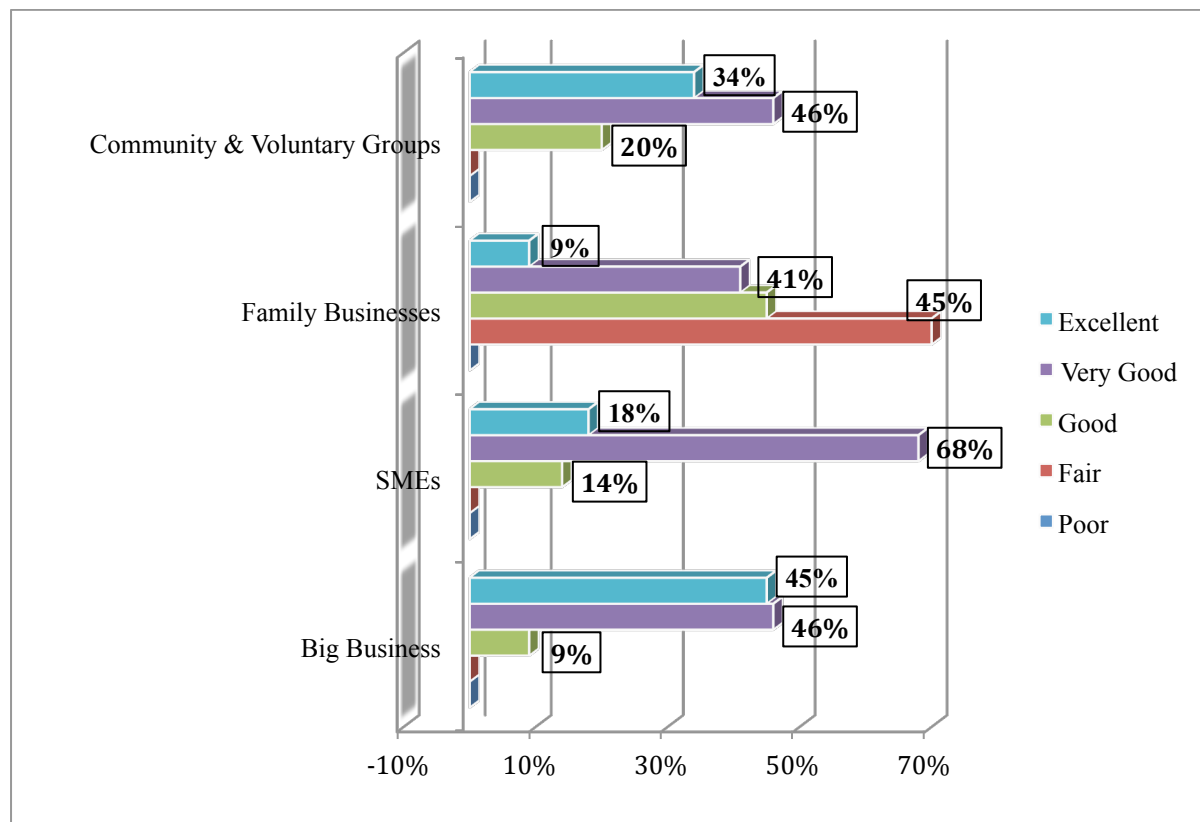
As can be seen above, according to placement practitioners, students generally enjoy their placement experience in whichever type of organisation they are based. However, there are a few issues depicted in this graph which are deserving of comment. Firstly, placement practitioners report that substantially more of their students based in family businesses regard their placement to be 'fair' or 'good' in comparison to those based in big business, SMEs and community and voluntary groups. In addition, the majority of students based in family businesses rate their placement experience as only 'good', compared to the majority of students in SMEs who rate their experience as 'very good', and the majority of students who are placed in big business who rate their experience as 'very good' and 'excellent'. In contrast, a large percentage of students based in community and voluntary groups report back to placement practitioners that their experience has been 'very good' or even 'excellent'.

The employer organisations survey also addressed the issue of feedback. Firstly, employers were asked to identify ways in which the placement student had been useful or a

burden to their organisations. They encouragingly reported that students were generally not a burden except for the 'time given to training and supervising the student from people who sometimes had very little time to spare.' However, they were much more forthcoming in the ways that a placement student had proven useful to their organisations and highlighted the following:

- New ideas from students are brought straight to your door;
- Students provide insight into new methods currently being taught at third level;
- Students are another pair of hands which takes the pressure of staff as they can help bring specific projects to completion;
- Students offered access to academic personnel and links to the HEI.

Employers were also asked to rate their overall past experience of work placement which can be seen in Figure 9 below.

Figure 9: Employer Organisations' Ratings of Placement Experience
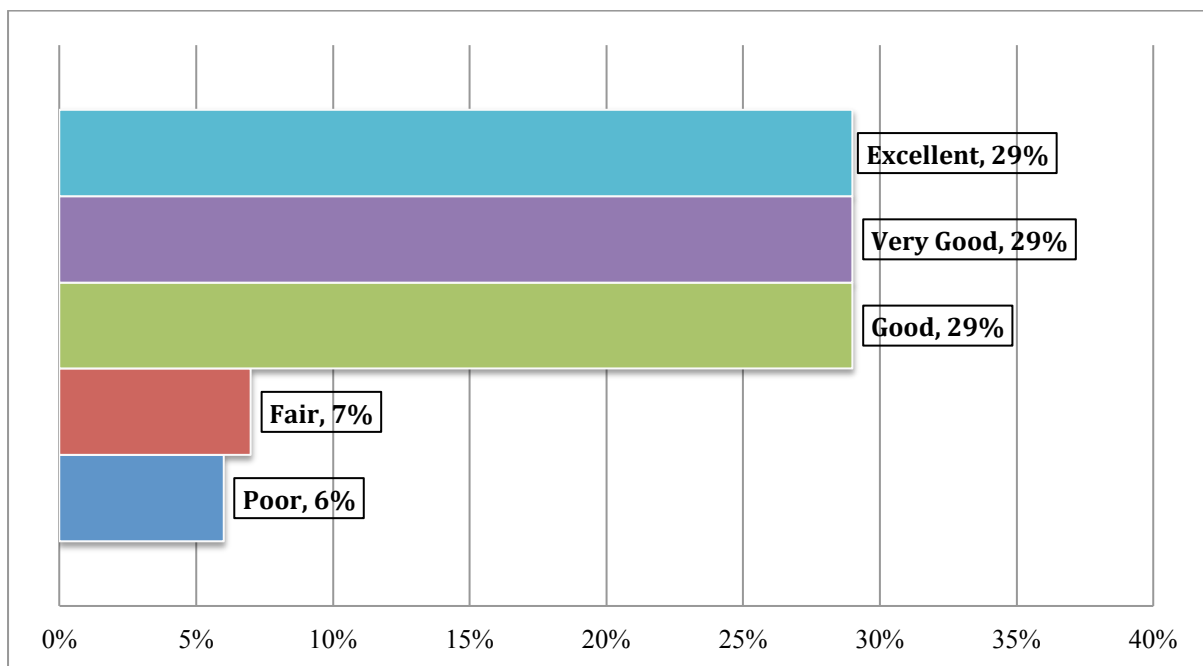
As figure 9 demonstrates, employers typically have a very positive experience when they engage in the work placement process. Very few of them reported a fair or poor experience. Those who did explained this rating with comments, including the following:

- Students have varied from excellent to fair. Attendance in some cases has been bad and student interaction with other staff members can be poor;

- Some students are not that suitable, interested or willing to work.

Comments from host organisations who rated their experience from good to excellent included:

- We found the experience to be very supportive to our organisation;
- Students have been enthusiastic, cooperative and work placement has generally benefited both students and this office;
- Generally a very high calibre of students available who do meaningful work for the company;
- Placement students offer the organisation access to the most up-to-date information and fresh thinking. They offer an opportunity to promote the work of the organisation among the future workforce and academia;
- We have been very happy with the calibre and work ethic of the students placed with us. To date, we have had students with a very positive attitude and a willingness to learn.

The generally positive nature of the work placement experience has led all employers surveyed (100%) to respond that they would hire a placement student upon graduation if the opportunity arose. In addition, of the organisations surveyed who had no past experience of work placement, 95 per cent of them said that they would consider taking on a work placement student in the future.

4.5   *Improving the Work Placement Process*

The final part of both surveys focused on how the work placement process could be improved. Firstly, the employer organisations were asked to identify ways in which HEIs could help them take on a work placement student. The most frequently cited response (35%) related to the issue of contact, with organisations recommending the following:

- Get more involved in the process once placement starts through periodic meetings and a few assessments;
- Keep in touch on a regular basis to ensure that students are available at appropriate times of the year for us.

Another issue that was mentioned by several employers was the timing of work placements, with one employer recommending that placement practitioners 'provide plenty of advance notice of request so that we can plan the most suitable time commitment.' Other employers focused on the issue of compatibility and recommended that placement practitioners 'ensure that students are compatible with the type of work the company carries out'. A further recommendation relates to the publicising of work placement opportunities among employers and   suggests that placement practitioners 'publicise the availability of students and their

disciplines more widely', and perhaps engage in 'a marketing campaign with a brochure that shows the benefits of work placement to companies from both a financial and productivity perspective.' One employer also recommended that host organisations should themselves be offered an opportunity to publicise what they could do for a placement student: 'ask us to come in at the beginning of the process or to provide some further information about possible student placement opportunities so that students have a better idea of who we are and what we can offer.' Further recommendations included the following:

- Ensure the placement is structured, monitored and with clear goals;
- Clearly provide guidelines to the students and have measure in place for students that perform unsatisfactorily;
- Make the process as simple as possible.

Employer organisations were then asked how the placement process could be improved. Again, the issue of increased contact was the most frequently cited with employers asking for:

- Regular contact with placement officers to ensure both student and employer are gaining the most from placement;
- More contact from college via phone or email. Also we need a direct contact in case difficulties arise.

Employers also asked that placement practitioners help increase their awareness of work placement:

- Get more information on the students available out to companies;
- HEIs should be more proactive about approaching businesses.

Further recommendations related to the functioning of the placement process, with suggestions including:

- HEIs should be more engaged in the screening of students to help find a fit with the company;
- HEIs may not be aware that voluntary organisations such as ours have been subjected to severe funding cuts and therefore the amount of staff available for admin/mentoring is at a premium, therefore the process should be streamlined and simplified as much as possible.

The survey sent to work placement practitioners also focused on this issue of improving the placement process, as practitioners were asked to identify elements of their own systems that work particularly well for engaging with family businesses and community and voluntary groups, and also elements of their systems that they have had to change or adjust for this form of engagement. In terms of what is working well, the most oft-cited

response was a personalised approach to this form of placement, with practitioners highlighting the following:

- Good personal relationships leading to an on-going relationship;

- One-to-one engagement. I can be their liaison for information from lecturers with regard to course content, etc.;

- Personalise the approach;

- Contacting these groups personally can improve relations as opposed to standard mailshots, which although necessary, may appear clinical to smaller organisations;

- Showing appreciation by personal letter afterwards.

Indeed, a recent PwC study stated that 'over three-quarters (78%) of Irish respondents said that the culture and values in family businesses are stronger than those in other sectors. This points to a more personal relationship with customers, staff and other stakeholders – all important ingredients for the long term' (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2012:6.)

Practitioners also mentioned the need for more frequent and efficient communication for these types of employers:

- Good communication by keeping in regular contact and conducting on-site visits when possible;

- Quick response time on our end helps the smaller employers to engage with the process more effectively;

- Close support and monitoring during the placement can help to make sure that the work done matches the job description provided to the student and that all parties are happy.

Other issues highlighted by placement practitioners included more of a focus on simplifying their approach and ensuring that these employers fully understand the process:

- Ensure the employer is clear on the scope of the placement and what their role is and the extent they must engage with the student;

- Documentation required of employers designed to be not too time-consuming or onerous;

- Explain the placement process clearly and define the expectations of all parties;

- Placement handbook and relevant documentation sent to each organisation in advance so supervisors are fully informed of the nature of the course and placement procedures;

- Demonstrate a willingness to withdraw student from placement if performing poorly.

Practitioners have also commented on how they provide greater support to the students on placement with these types of organisations:

- Ongoing contact with the student either in person or by phone/email offers great support to students which helps them make a greater contribution to their host organisation.

In relation to elements of their standard system that placement practitioners have had

to change or alter in order to improve the placement process for family businesses and community and voluntary groups, a number of key areas were identified:

- I need to tailor emails, etc., depending on the organisation as these types of groups need more information as to the college's and student's expectations as they are often unfamiliar with the formal aspects of placement;
- We have to encourage family businesses to recruit faster as they are in competition with larger firms;
- I have had to work on a closer basis with and provide more support to placements with family businesses as opposed to MNCs;
- You can't presume they have the same knowledge about student recruitment as bigger employers. You have to give more time and support to working with these employers as they are not familiar with the process and particularly may not understand college expectations around academic assessment and so require more time, effort and support;
- Reduce the length of the placement;
- We have provided training workshops for supervisors who had no previous experience of supervising students on placement.

As the research compiled from the surveys detailed in the previous pages is so extensive, it is worth examining the key issues arising from this study in greater detail.

5   Key Challenges for Engagement on Work Placement

At the beginning of this paper, the key questions of this work were listed as:

- How can HEIs reach these organisations (i.e. family businesses and community and voluntary groups) and establish lasting partnerships with them?
- What kind of practical difficulties exist in this type of engagement?
- How can these obstacles be overcome?

It may be useful now to return to these core questions and to try to address each of them in this section of the paper.

5.1   *How can HEIs reach these employer organisations and establish lasting partnerships with them?*

Of the employer organisations surveyed by the project team, over a quarter of them had never previously been asked to participate in work placement, even though almost all (95%) of them stated that they would consider engaging in work placement in the future. This demonstrates that there is a real willingness among these employers to engage with HEIs and give something back to the community, provided that the conditions are right.

One of the first things that needs to be done by placement practitioners in order to reach these employer organisations is to publicise the availability of placement opportunities more widely. Some placement practitioners mentioned that in trying to source new placement partners, they contacted various bodies in their localities looking for contact details of family businesses and community and voluntary groups, including local authorities, social workers, health authorities and county enterprise boards. The results from our project survey clearly demonstrated that these employers would be willing to engage in placement if they had a greater level of awareness about the opportunities and benefits that placement can offer. Indeed, employers typically want to know what do they get out of any deal and placement is no different. The idea of placement needs to be sold and marketed to these potential partners, as many of them have only marginal understanding of the placement process, as was demonstrated earlier in this paper. Placement practitioners could create a marketing campaign clearly outlining the benefits of work placements to employers, which have been covered extensively in a study by Harvey, *et al*. (1998) and have been summarised in the REAP project's report on work placement (2011: 19), as:

- Extra workers at low cost;
- Setting up of a new project;
- Completion of specific tasks;
- Opportunity to give a potential recruit a trial without obligation;
- Using students' reflection on work experience as a recruitment criterion;
- Having a pool of potential recruits with some general awareness of workplace culture;
- An injection of new ideas;
- Developing links with HEIs for a range of purposes such as research and development, or targeting 'high-flyer' recruits;
- Staff development opportunities that arise from employees mentoring students.

Drawing employers' attention to these benefits is likely to prove to be a useful exercise as many of them have admitted that they are in need of the benefits that placement can offer. Indeed, a recent PwC report on family businesses outlined that 'nearly two-thirds (63%) of responding Irish family firms said that innovation was key to achieving growth targets over the coming five years … However, family businesses are concerned that having family members in key positions may mean that the company is less open to new thinking

and ideas' (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2012:8). If family businesses were willing to engage in a typical short-term work placement (4-6 months) without having to make any long-term commitment such as employing a new staff member, it may be an easy way for owner-managers to begin to open up to new thinking and ideas. The same PwC report also highlighted that the recruitment of skilled staff is a significant issue for Irish family businesses, with over a third (36%) of respondents to their survey saying that 'attracting the right skills/talent will be a key challenge over the next five years' (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2012:4). A quarter of their respondents said that 'young people entering the jobs market do not have the right skills and education' (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2012:8). Through engaging in work placement, these employer organisations have the opportunity to contribute to the upskilling of the next generation and perhaps even to curriculum development through their enhanced relationship with academia which comes hand in hand with work placement. Many community and voluntary groups are also in need of the benefits that work placement students bring with them to organisations. A recent article by Holland (2012) in the *Irish Times* outlined how:

> Over the past four years most of the Republic's voluntary and other nonprofit organisations, of which 8,000 are registered charities, have seen significant falls in their income and increased demand for their services. Many have been forced to close; others have survived by innovating, cutting costs and even expanding their services.

A survey carried out by *The Wheel* in 2011 also highlighted these issues, stating that:

- More than 30% of charities and community groups in Ireland say they are facing closure, or are unsure about their future survival;

- A total of 23% say they are unsure of their future, with a further 12% saying that there is a risk that they may have to suspend their operations within the next year;

- Nearly half say they have suspended or delayed projects in the past six months due to financial considerations;

- 60% have experienced a drop in income of up to 20% and 47% have experienced a drop in donations, leading many to curtail their services and even consider closure (Irish Examiner, 2011).

Work placement students could be valuable assets to many of these organisations as they can help to complete specific projects, bring new and innovative ideas to staff, and generally help ease the workload of these over-burdened groups.

Once employers are aware of placement, and placement practitioners get the opportunity to communicate with them (either by contacting them directly or responding to

contact initiated by the employer organisation), it is essential that placement practitioners take the time to clearly define the work placement process to them, including its goals, the expectations for all key stakeholders, and the general operation of the process (to include issues such as recruitment, induction, insurance, pay, mentoring, supervision, disciplinary procedures, etc.). Indeed, placement practitioners should keep two things in mind when communicating the work placement process to family businesses and community and voluntary groups: clarify and simplify. While the level of explanation and contact these organisations need at this stage may be significantly greater than perhaps placement partners in big business (who are generally more aware of work placements and internships), it is nonetheless vital for placement practitioners to be patient and supportive during this early phase of relationship building. It is also important for placement practitioners to remember that this explanation activity will typically only have to happen for the first year of the placement partnership as these types of organisations generally have the same staff in the same positions for a number of years, whereas staff turnover in big business can be much greater. If there is an opportunity for repeat business the following year, the placement should be much easier to organise. In addressing this issue, placement practitioners could develop a package of documents for first-time placement partners from family businesses and community and voluntary groups. This package could incorporate among other things:

- A promotional leaflet on the benefits of work placement;
- A brief outline of the HEI's requirements and expectations (hours of work, mentoring, support, etc.) of the placement host organisation;
- An overview of the structure of work placement (i.e. is there a sign-off on the placement at the beginning by both the HEI and the employer; is there a mid-way progress report; is there an end of placement evaluation, etc.);
- Details on assessment and disciplinary procedures;
- Full contact details of the placement practitioner (as well as one alternative contact if the main contact cannot be reached);
- Templates and ideas for job specifications, contracts, student induction, confidentiality agreements, etc.

While this exercise would initially be time-consuming, it would be a resource that could be used countless times when establishing new placement partnerships.

With regard to establishing lasting partnerships with family businesses and community and voluntary groups, it is essential that their very first experience of hosting a

work placement student is a very positive and professional one as this first foray into placement provision may mean the difference between securing (or not) repeat business. Of the survey respondents who took it upon themselves to contact a HEI seeking a work placement student, almost a third of them had a less than satisfactory experience. Their comments included the following:

- Usually hard to find the right match between company needs and student availability;
- We were unsuccessful in getting a student;
- I have yet to receive a response!

First impressions such as these are unlikely to lead to lasting partnerships for placement practitioners. To avoid such cases, it is important that HEIs try as much as possible to be flexible in their dealings with employer organisations. It is also essential for HEIs to have clear points of contact for placement programmes so that queries are not left unanswered if they do not fall on the correct person's desk. In addition, having a very concise and transparent process is likely to be attractive to employers, many of whom are already struggling with time management. If these issues and the ones outlined below can be overcome, placement practitioners should be able to establish lasting partnerships with family businesses and community and voluntary groups where feasible.

5.2 What kind of practical difficulties exist in this type of engagement?/How can the obstacles identified be overcome?

The surveys discussed earlier in this document outlined a number of significant challenges for engaging in work placement with family businesses and community and voluntary groups. Although these issues can be obstructive to the work placement process, there are ways of overcoming such difficulties to the mutual benefit of all stakeholders.

Firstly, in terms of resources, many family businesses and community and voluntary groups are already struggling to run their organisations and have very few resources to spare. Unfortunately, even the most competent of placement students is going to require some investment of resources (training, supervision, mentoring, etc.) from the host organisation. The requirement to commit these resources to a placement student can often be seen as overwhelming and beyond the capabilities of already stretched staff. It is important for placement practitioners to confirm to prospective placement partners that there will have to

be some commitment of resources to a placement student. However, this discussion could be framed in the wider context of the benefits that a placement student can bring to an organisation, as were outlined previously in this paper. Once a prospective employer is aware that placement is a mutually beneficial exercise for all key stakeholders, as students and employers have both something to offer and something to gain, then placement might be viewed as a worthy exercise deserving of a certain resource commitment. Indeed, in the early project workshops held with placement practitioners, several of them were keen to highlight that a large part of their role is akin to that of a salesperson, in that they are trying to 'sell' the idea of work placement to employer organisations. As in any sales position, some clients are going to be a tougher 'sell' than others, but closing the deal can often depend on the sales approach adopted.

Resourcing is also a significant challenge for placement practitioners as family businesses and community and voluntary groups tend to want a greater level of contact and support from placement practitioners than other placement partners, and often placement practitioners are restricted in the time they can dedicate to this activity. While there is little that can be done to avoid this, it is likely that as a partnership develops and repeat business is secured with these organisations, the level of support required should increasingly diminish.

Further challenges were outlined regarding a lack of understanding among family businesses and community and voluntary groups of what exactly work placement entails and the core aims it hopes to achieve. Many employers viewed it more as a shadowing exercise where students would learn through observation, whereas in fact, the student should be assigned some tasks to carry out on an individual basis so that he/she can learn through action and meet the learning outcomes of his/her placement. This project hopes to go some way towards addressing this deficit of understanding by developing a brief brochure for employer organisations outlining the concept of work placement, the benefits it can bring to organisations and the work placement process itself. This brochure will be widely disseminated and will hopefully improve awareness of work placement among employer organisations:

- The brochure will be distributed to all of the employer organisations who participated in this study;

- An electronic version of the brochure will be sent to all Chambers of Commerce around the country so that they might include it as a resource on their websites;
- It will be passed onto a number of umbrella organisations who represent our target employer groups including Family Business Ireland and The Wheel for dissemination to their members;
- Finally, it will be given to placement practitioners around the country so that they can have a practical tool to 'break the ice' when trying to establish new placement partnerships with family businesses and community and voluntary groups.

This difficulty surrounding understanding the concept of work placement closely relates to another issue around expectations, where both the employer organisations and students often have quite unrealistic expectations of the placement process. In terms of the employers, many expect students to be able to fulfil a full role within the organisation very quickly, while others expect the students to sit and watch from a distance for the entire time. Student expectations can also be askew, where they might expect to have to participate in the workplace far more or far less than their employer requires. There also seems to be a lack of understanding among students regarding what these employer organisations can offer them on work placement. Many of them are just concerned with having a 'big name' on their CV, whereas their employability skills might be much more enhanced in a family business or community and voluntary group. Placement practitioners can play a significant role in managing these expectations and ensuring that all stakeholders are fully aware of what is expected of them during all stages of the work placement process. They must actively engage with all parties to make sure that each one fully understands their role in the placement relationship. Placement practitioners can also help students to realise the benefits of obtaining their work placement in a family business or community and voluntary group. There is no doubt that many placement practitioners are aware of the benefits these unique opportunities can offer students (as they outlined in their survey responses), however, there may be a missed opportunity in not fully communicating these advantages to students. Reinforcing the message that work placement should be about the learning opportunity offered and not necessarily the 'big name for the CV' should help more students to want to engage with family businesses and community and voluntary groups.

Practical issues have also been identified relating to the duration and timing of work placements. For many organisations, in the current economic climate, a six or nine month placement can just be too difficult to plan. Also, work placements are scheduled at particular

times of the academic year for academic purposes, but quite often, these periods do not coincide with the busy periods for employer organisations when a placement student would be of most use. Perhaps there may be an opportunity here for improved flexibility in the work placement structures of HEIs. In the workshops held as part of this project's research, several placement practitioners explained that, on occasion, they had permitted students to undertake shorter placements with two or three separate employer organisations within the nine month bloc allocated for their work placement as good learning opportunities had arisen for students from employers who could not commit to the full nine month placement. Instead of turning these employers and the experiences they had to offer away, they had combined a few of them together to fulfill the contact hours requirement for the student. The students in these arrangements benefitted as they gained great experience in a wide range of contexts, while the employers gained from having a placement student for a time limit that they were comfortable with. At a time when work placements can be difficult to source, this may be one method for placement practitioners to explore. With regard to the timing of placements, a longer term exercise for placement practitioners might be to liaise with employers about when the most appropriate time of the year would be for them to engage in work placement. If a substantial number of employer organisations highlight the same time of the year, then there might be an opportunity for placement practitioners and academic staff to examine the possibility of moving the work placement to the requested period.

A final difficulty relating to the matching of students with employer organisations was also idenitifed in this research. Many of these employer organisations have had little or no experience of work placement in the past and may not be aware of the importance of engaging in the recruitment process with placement practitioners. Many employer organisations want placement practitioners to find them the perfect student to fit their needs, and are somewhat diappointed if this does not happen. In the discussions at the project workshops, placement practitioners clearly outlined the benefits of employers themselves engaging in the recruitment process for work placement students. The practitioners highlighted that most of their successful experiences in engaging with family businesses and community and voluntary groups occurred when employers interviewed the students themselves, thus leading them to conclude that recruiting a work placement student should,

where possible, be treated in the same manner as an organisation's standard recruitment operation. While admittedly this may incur a further resource commitment by employer organisations, the return on this investment is worth it. In conducting their own interviews rather than just taking a designated student chosen by a placement practitioner, employers are able to have a much greater role in ensuring that the placement student will both meet the needs of the organisation and fit in as part of the team. The interview is also an important learning expereince for the student.

This section of the paper has demonstrated that although significant challenges remain for family businesses and community and voluntary groups engaging in the work placement process with Irish HEIs, there are means of overcoming all of these obstacles to the benefit of the key stakeholders involved. The final part of this study will outline recommendations for best practise for this form of work placement engagement.

6   Recommendations for Best Practise

The 2010 study conducted by the REAP project on 'Work Placement in Third Level Programmes' outlined a number of guidelines for both placement practitioners and employers at three key stages of the work placement process: pre-placement; during placement; and post-placement. This same method will be adopted in this paper and the original REAP guidelines will be adapted for family businesses and community and voluntary groups.[3]

6.1   Pre-placement

In the pre-placement stage, placement practitioners need to:

- Establish procedures for securing work placements, criteria for the approval of placements, and consequences for students who fail to secure or to complete a suitable placement;

- Optimise their students' opportunity for workplace learning by compiling and maintaining approved employer listings, in conjunction with local or national employers and employer organisations, and to support students in their own searches for opportunities where appropriate. *At this point, placement practitioners should proactively promote the value of work placements in family businesses and community and voluntary groups to students, as well as seeking out placement partnerships with these kinds of organisations and promoting placement opportunities to them*;

- Consider health and safety issues and insurance arrangements when assessing suitable employment locations;

- Ensure that the employer organisation is suitably prepared for the placement by providing them, where

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[3] Amendments to the original REAP work placement guidelines will be italicised.

possible, with:

- o *A personalised approach in all dealings with them (i.e. email, phone, one-to-one meetings, etc.);*
- o *Greater time and support in explaining the process during their first experience of engagement;*
- o *A brief and simplified overview of work placement and the employer's role in this arrangement – a discussion should also be facilitated at this stage around the employers expectations of the placement student;*
- o Details of *the key goals of placement*, as well as the learning outcomes and assessment methodologies applicable to the placement;
- o *Help with recruiting an appropriate student to meet their organisation's specific needs;*
- o Contact arrangements for the duration of the placement;
- o *Details of the procedures in place to deal with unsatisfactory students;*
- o An input to the development of suitable induction processes for the student;
- o Guidance and support for the workplace mentor who will have responsibility for the student for the duration of the placement.
- *Consider developing a package of documents to be used in assisting first-time placement partners through the process. This package could incorporate among other things:*
  - o *A promotional leaflet on the benefits of work placement;*
  - o *A brief outline of the HEI's requirements and expectations (hours of work, mentoring, support, etc.) of the placement host organisation;*
  - o *An overview of the structure of work placement (i.e. is there a sign-off on the placement at the beginning by both the HEI and the employer; is there a mid-way progress report; is there an end of placement evaluation, etc.);*
  - o *Details on assessment and disciplinary procedures;*
  - o *Full contact details of the placement practitioner (as well as one alternative contact if the main contact cannot be reached);*
  - o *Templates and ideas for job specifications, contracts, student induction, confidentiality agreements, etc.*

Prior to the placement, the employer organisation should:

- *Ensure they have full understanding of the placement process and what is expected of them by the HEI partner;*
- *Prepare an appropriate job specification outlining the type of work the student will be doing;*
- *Actively engage in the student selection process by meeting and interviewing students themselves;*
- Clarify the contact details in the employer organisation and the HEI with responsibility for the student placement;
- *Give some consideration to how the students learning outcomes could be met;*
- Appoint and prepare a mentor to support the student in the workplace.

6.2   *During the Placement*

The main responsibilities for placement practitioners during placement include:

- Maintaining the three-way (student, employer, HEI) contact mechanisms with appropriate

communication *and support for both the employer and student as required throughout the duration of the placement so that the employer feels like they are an important part of the process*;

- *Responding to queries from the employer organisation in a timely and professional manner;*

- On-going assessment of the placement's learning outcomes;

- Timely feedback and formative assessment on the attainment and evidence of the required learning.

During placement, the employer should:

- Provide suitable induction and supervision arrangements for the student;

- *Give the student every opportunity to both work and learn;*

- *Attempt, where possible, to focus the student's experience towards the placement goals and learning outcomes set out before the commencement of the placement;*

- *Communicate any difficulties or issues to the placement practitioner in a timely fashion so that they can be addressed before the completion of the placement;*

- Provide regular and appropriate feedback to the student and the HEI.

6.3   Post-placement

Following the completion of the placement, the placement practitioner should:

- Complete the assessment of the student's placement including the employer assessment elements;

- Seek and act on feedback from the employer and from the student on the placement process as part of a continuous cycle of improvement;

- Explore other potential opportunities for engagement with the employer.

Following the placement, the employer should:

- Provide appropriate feedback on the student performance as part of the assessment process;

- Provide feedback and suggestions for the improvement of the placement process;

- Consider further engagement opportunities with the HEI.

In adapting and tweaking their standard placement processes in the manner outlined in this section of the paper, the work placement process should hopefully prove to be a more accessible and beneficial form of engagement for family businesses and community and voluntary groups.

7   Conclusion

Placement practitioners have acknowledged that in the current economic climate, it has become somewhat more difficult for them to source the ever-growing number of work placements required by students in Irish HEIs. This paper has outlined the case for stronger placement partnerships to be developed between HEIs and family businesses and community

and voluntary groups as one way of overcoming this lack of sufficient placement opportunities. The results of this project's research have also demonstrated a real openness and willingness among family businesses and community and voluntary groups to engage more actively in this process where possible. However, while the benefits of this form of engagement are plentiful for both students and employer organisations alike, a number of difficulties do need to be addressed and overcome. Challenges currently exist around a number of key issues such as the awareness of placement opportunities among employer organisations; understanding of the work placement process; resources to support work placement; the management of both employers' and students' expectations of work placement; and more practical matters such as the duration and timing of placements, and the recruitment of students. Although these obstacles do pose a challenge to creating work placement links with family businesses and community and voluntary groups, as this paper has shown, they should in no way fully impede the development of placement partnerships with these types of employer organisations. Indeed, while it is important that these placement partnerships are acknowledged as being 'different' from the traditional placement partners in big business, there is no reason that they should not be as successful. Using the best practise guidelines outlined in the previous pages, both placement practitioners and family businesses and community and voluntary groups should be able to engage in a work placement process that is simple, transparent and well-structured. This form of engagement offers a number of important benefits for students and staff in Irish HEIs, as well as Irish family businesses and community and voluntary groups, benefits that can only help to enrich the Irish economy and labour market.

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