

2011

Work Placement in Third-Level Programmes

Roadmap for Employment-Academic Partnerships

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Roadmap for Employment-Academic Partnerships, Sheridan, I. and Linehan, M. Work Placement in Third-Level Programmes. Published by CIT Press, Bishopstown, Cork, Ireland, 2011.

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Work Placement in Third-Level Programmes



Edited by Irene Sheridan
and Dr Margaret Linehan





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The REAP Project is a Strategic Innovation Fund Project

www.reap.ie

Publication Information

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Published by CIT Press, Bishopstown, Cork, Ireland.
Design by Raven Design
Printed by City Print Ltd

© CIT Press 2011
ISBN 978-1-906953-07-2

Acknowledgements

This document is based on contributions from individuals and groups. The principal contributors are the members of the REAP working group listed in Appendix E. Many others within the partner academic institutions and elsewhere helped to make this work possible.

The REAP project is funded by the Strategic Innovation Fund Cycle 2 from the Higher Education Authority under the National Development Plan 2006-2013.

Foreword



Work Placement in Third-Level Programmes is one of a number of significant outputs of the Roadmap for Employment–Academic Partnerships (REAP) Project. This report draws together for the first time perspectives on placement from all of the key stakeholders. In addition to providing a unique overview of the placement experience the project team have used the information gathered to develop a useful, transferable toolkit for placement.

The toolkit includes guidelines for good practice for Higher Education Institutions, Employers and Students. A blueprint Placement Pack has been developed for Employers and for Students which includes an outline base-level three way agreement as well as a structured learning and assessment outline which will go a long way to addressing the communication deficits which were clearly articulated in the research.

The REAP Project is a consortium led by Cork Institute of Technology and including Athlone Institute of Technology; Dublin Institute of Technology; Institute of Technology, Sligo; Institute of Technology, Tallaght, Dublin; National University of Ireland Galway; University College, Cork; and Waterford Institute of Technology. This work represents significant efforts by all project partners and valuable input from outside the project partnership including Forfás, Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, IBEC and a wide range of employers, employers' representatives and higher education institution staff and students.

This publication will be welcomed by all involved in programme design, in placement planning, and in engagement between higher education and workplaces generally. I would like to acknowledge the tireless efforts of the working group in publishing this important report.



Michael Delaney,
Vice President for Development,
Cork Institute of Technology.

The Innovation Task Force and the National Competitiveness Council see the role of higher education as critical for on-going development in Ireland as it provides significant opportunities to drive competitiveness both nationally and regionally. A recent Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) report (2010) also emphasises that stronger links and partnerships between higher education institutions should help to restore Ireland's competitiveness. Work placements are recognised as one of the early mechanisms for initiating partnerships between higher education and industry. As the nature and scope of businesses are rapidly changing, the competences that future employees will require are also changing. Work placements afford opportunities for more collaboration between third-level institutions and employers, in order to maximise resources and prepare graduates with required competences for the workplace. Competences acquired from non-formal and informal situations are essential parts of individual learning.

To contextualise work placements for this report, a review of the extant literature on work placements was conducted. These literature findings are summarised and presented in the first section of the report. One of the key messages arising from the literature search is that the global economic downturn has placed a new emphasis on employability and transferable skills. Work placements provide a unique and valuable learning experience for students to enable them to gain the transferable generic skills that employers seek.

Blackwell *et al.* (2001) observed that good quality work-based learning has six characteristics:

- Stakeholders — students, employers, academic staff, and employees — all understand the underlying intentions. It is meaningful;
- The quality of work experience is greatly enhanced by prior induction and briefing for all concerned; by facilitation of on-going reflection; by debriefing, reflection and identification of outcomes. Learning is the goal.
- Work experience is accredited so that it is taken seriously;
- Formative assessment is used to support the process of learning from work experience;
- Students build up a work-experience portfolio;
- Students can say what they have learned, provide illustrations and, if need be, commentary. There is effective reflection.

Acknowledging the importance of the three stakeholders in the work placement experience — higher education institutions (HEIs), employers, and students — empirical research was conducted with these three cohorts to ascertain the current state of work-placement provision. The findings from the research are presented in the second section of the report.

The main benefits of work placements for HEIs, identified by the research conducted with higher education staff, include opportunities to enhance networking and mutual understanding with workplaces, integrating employability skills into the curriculum, and applying theoretical knowledge in practice. Concerns raised by higher education staff, in relation to the work placement, include difficulties in sourcing placement opportunities for a growing number of students, lack of alternatives to placements within programmes, and a lack of dedicated resources to organise and monitor placement learning and the overall placement experience.



Agreed Benefits

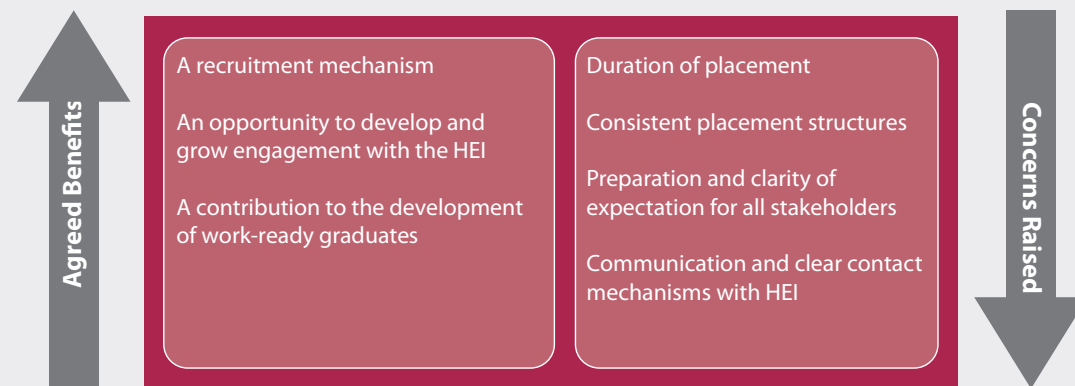
- Enhancing networking and mutual understanding between HEI and workplaces
- Maintaining curriculum relevance along with opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge to practice
- Integrating employability skills into curriculum

Concerns Raised

- Need for allocated resources to organise and monitor placement learning
- No consistent framework for alternatives to placements within programmes
- Difficulty in sourcing placements for growing number of students (particularly sourcing & managing international placements)

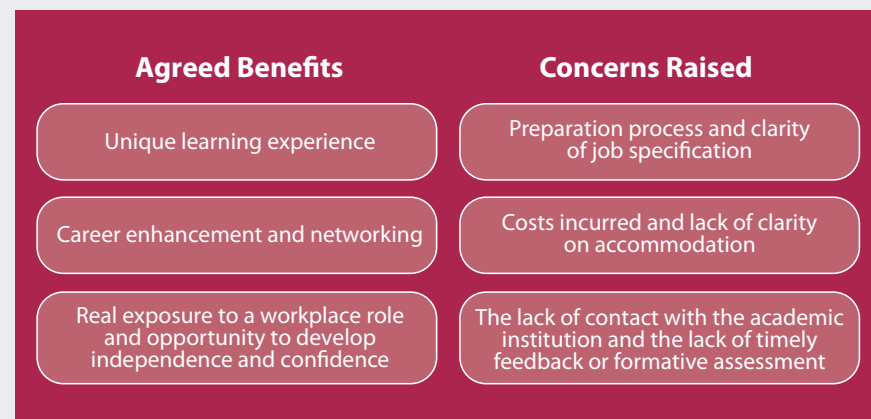
Summary of higher education staff views on work placement

The main motivations for employers to be involved in placement include opportunities to develop research links and engagement with higher education institutions, a recruitment mechanism, and the ability to contribute to the overall development of employment-ready graduates. Employers also outlined some of the main benefits students gained from placements, including opportunities to develop interpersonal and generic skills, the ability to put theoretical knowledge into practice thereby enhancing their future employability prospects. Concerns raised by employers include the preparation and lack of clear expectations for all stakeholders, the short duration of some placements, and the contact and communication mechanisms with higher education institutions.



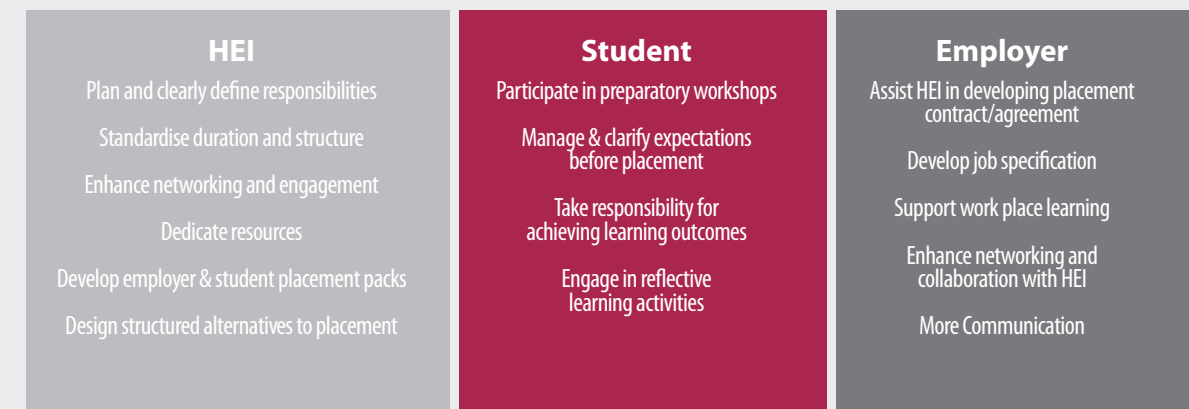
Summary of employers' views of work placement

All students represented in this research found work placement to be a positive unique learning experience, which was a good fit with their third-level programme, and helped prepare them for their future careers. The main benefits of work placements, identified by the students, include opportunities to develop independence and self-confidence, networking, and ability to put their theoretical knowledge into practice. Some of the concerns raised by students were difficulties associated with accommodation, transport, payment, and support from the HEIs.



Summary of students' views of placement

Overall, the findings suggest 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.



Stakeholders' responsibilities for improving the placement process

Having reviewed and analysed the research findings, the project team developed a set of guidelines for good practice in placement for HEIs, employers and students. These guidelines are provided in Appendix A. Recognising that many of the concerns raised by all parties relate to preparation, planning, clarity of expectations and communications, the REAP team developed outline Placement Packs for Employers and Students (Appendices B and C). These packs provide a useful blueprint for improvement of the placement process.

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1 Introduction

1.0 Background

Work placements are not a new type of activity or a new trend in education. From the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, John Dewey, an educational reformer, believed that life and learning should be firmly integrated. He asserted that:

The inclination 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: 51).

Dewey's ideas of experiential learning offer a firm basis for the value of learning through work experience. This means that workers who are increasingly faced with novel and unpredictable work demands must be able to learn on the job as requirements emerge. Similarly, in the USA from as early as 1901, Herman Schneider, engineer, architect, and educator, concluded that the traditional classroom was insufficient for technical students. Schneider observed that several of the more successful university graduates had worked to earn money before graduation. Gathering data through interviews of employers and graduates, he devised the framework for cooperative education. Cooperative education is recognised as a structured method of combining classroom-based education with practical work experience. A cooperative education experience provides academic credit for structured job experience.

Work placement programmes, therefore, have been long associated with various types of apprenticeships and higher education contexts throughout the USA, Canada, and various European countries. Academic disciplines such as medicine and social work have included work placements as central elements in their programmes for many years. Students on many of these programmes have always undertaken a large part of their learning off-campus in external organisations in the form of practice placements and extended periods of time spent 'doing the job' under close supervision.

Work placements have been defined in a number of ways, some more expansive than others. All definitions, however, include the key notion that work placements involve 'gaining experience on the job' and are now a recognised part of many third-level programmes. Coco (2000) suggested that work placements are a "planned transition from the classroom to the job, and are a natural bridge between college and the work world". In Britain, the Department for Education and Skills defined work placements as:

A planned period of work-based learning or experience, where the learning outcomes are part of a course or programme of study. This is usually provided outside the institution at which the student is enrolled. Work placements may be part of a sandwich course, a short placement, a work taster, temporary work or a period of supported employment as part of vocational training. Placements may also take place abroad. Students may arrange their own placement, or they may be set up by the institution or a third party. (DfES, 2002: 2).

In some countries, the work placement part of a programme is referred to as cooperative study or internship. In various third-level programmes, work placement is frequently offered between the second and final year of an undergraduate degree programme. Courses of this nature are often called sandwich courses.

Over the years, as new technologies are introduced, new collaborations are formed and new competitive challenges are faced, individual workers must be able to learn to adapt. This calls for new learning concepts, strategies and

practices that assist in greater integration of work and learning and, as Boud and Solomon (2001) suggested, it may be necessary to look beyond traditional education and training practices to achieve this integration. Boud and Solomon further proposes that educators must begin to consider what the limits of their traditional educational practices are in the context of learning at work and what, if any, new practices can be invoked to assist this process. They suggest that:

The conventional separation of learning and work is breaking down. Our practice is grounded at a very deep level in a set of assumptions about the separateness of learning and work. Our practice as educators has been dependent on this separation. Our educational institutions are separated physically and conceptually from the points of application of learning and we need to find ways of bridging this gap.

A report by Chappell *et al.* (2003:10) recognises this gap, suggesting that:

If learning has become an integral part of working, arguably formal education and training systems would need to consider what new role they might play in the development of the workforce. One specific implication is that formal education and training is no longer a stand-alone intervention in economic productivity — to have full effect it must be more systematically linked to wider human resource management strategies, encompassing new approaches to job design and work organisation.


A recent study conducted by Jackson (2006) with work placement tutors revealed that the tutors perceived the learning potential of a work placement "as being huge and varied". The placement tutors observed that the diversity of learning, the fact that learning is contextualised and socialised, and forms of learning (for example, emotional intelligence and coping with the unexpected) that are not generally recognised in disciplinary learning contexts all make the work placement an important environment for learning.

For the purpose of this report, 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. Work can mean paid or unpaid employment.

1.1 Work Placements and Employability Skills

The changing need of higher education to interface more effectively with industry has been widely documented, as has the rising awareness of those attributes which most benefit graduates seeking employment. Today, students need skills for lifelong learning; information literacy; problem solving and critical thinking; the ability to work autonomously, alone and in groups. Reported 'information deficits', where students know about specific subjects, but not necessarily how to operate in a working environment, highlight the need for third-level education, through its curricula, to foster this transition (Havard *et al.* 1998). A key way in which third-level institutions can build stronger partnerships with employers, and assist their students in post-graduate success, is through the provision of work placements.

Traditionally, in many areas of third-level education, teaching and learning has been organised around disciplinary knowledge and governed by academic interests. More recently, however, due to an increasing focus on personal transferable skills by third-level institutions and demands made by increasing numbers of students, who view their



further studies as part of the natural transition process from college to work, there has been a shift in programme focus to the development of more work-related skills (Krause, *et al.*, 2005; Albrecht and Sack 2000). The erosion of job security and a change in the economic climate has also led to changing career directions and a new emphasis on employability and transferable skills.

Employability is becoming a key benchmark for career success (Carbery and Garavan, 2005). The purpose of work placements has been variously described as gaining 'employability', acquiring 'transferable' or 'generic' skills, developing an understanding of world and work organisations, and understanding the 'real world' application of skills (Baird, 2005; Pickles, 1999). Employability is generally regarded as a set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and to be successful in their chosen occupations. Yorke and Knight (2004) add that employability is a blend of understanding, skilful practices, efficacy beliefs (or legitimate self-confidence), and reflectiveness.

Higher education, therefore, has been moving away from the traditional knowledge-based approach towards a more competence-based learning focus (Gillies and Howard, 2003; James, 2002). Thus, employability competences have become part of the education agenda.

This has entailed identifying with industry the competences needed by graduates, both immediately and later in their careers, and then mapping the acquisition of these competences into the curriculum. Employability competences have been defined as a dynamic combination of knowledge, understanding, skills and abilities which are obtained by a process of learning (Gonzalez and Wagenaar, 2005).

These competences can either be generic (across all study areas) or subject specific (in a particular discipline or sector). According to Stewart and Knowles (2000), employability is a concern to students, as one of the prime motivations in attending a third-level college for the majority of students is not to study a particular subject in depth, but to enhance their employment prospects and quality of employment. Some theorists suggest there are three key elements to employability; the ability to gain initial employment, the ability to maintain employment and make transitions between jobs and roles within the same organisation to meet new job requirements, and the ability to obtain new employment, if required, by being independent in the labour market and able to manage employment transitions between organisations (Hillage and Pollard, 1999). Graduates need to leave a third-level institution having acquired some if not all of the skills required to facilitate their employability prospects. Moreau and Leathwood (2006) suggest that there is a demand for third-level institutions to deliver vocational and marketable skills and to provide a pathway to employment.

Research by Herbert and Rothwell (2005) confirms a shift towards employability skills being increasingly important in the recruitment and selection of graduate employees. Their research highlighted the value of work-integrated learning, especially work-based placements, involving academic institutions and business organisations. Similarly, Morse (2006) and Fanthorne (2004) found that many organisations attach strategic importance to work-integrated learning by offering direct work experience to those who may be their future employees. Their research also suggested that employers seek people who are work ready as opposed to merely academically qualified.

For some HEIs, the workplace is seen more favourably as a legitimate site for contextualised learning that can bridge the gap between theory and practice and promote the development of desirable core graduate attributes. The workplace provides opportunities for students to learn in and through work rather than learning about and for work, but, despite being recognised traditionally in some professions such as engineering and nursing, it is not a normal mode of delivery for many third-level programmes (Keating, 2006). Established programmes with

a work-placement element recognise that working knowledge is "rarely codified in text books, formal training programmes, competency standards or procedures manuals and is more likely to be developed within the context and environment of the immediate workplace" (Keating, 2006). Many researchers concur that knowledge which can be applied is far more valuable to students than explicit academic knowledge in that it is contextual, social, and situation specific (Tucker, 2006; Symes & McIntyre, 2000; Bowden 1997). Students can engage in real work practices in a work environment, learn how to communicate with colleagues, and deal with work related problems. Learning becomes less theory based and more practical and contextual. Exposure to actual or simulated workplace tasks and problems allows students to experience ever-widening variation in knowledge application, and to see the limits to their understanding and how that needs to be addressed; both of these are said to be essential to deep learning and for a capacity to deal with novel situations (Bowden, 1997). Workplace learning programmes are, therefore, designed to capitalise on the inherent link between theory and its place in professional practice. Recent research by Billet (2009) summarised that both practice and academic settings provide particular kinds of experiences and potential contributions to student learning, and each of these settings affords particular potentials for the learning of occupational practice.

In Britain, the profile of work placements in third-level institutions was raised by the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, which recommended identifying "opportunities to increase the extent to which programmes help students to become familiar with work, and help them to reflect on such experience" (Dearing, 1997). The main skills for graduates which were identified by employers in the report were communication, numeracy, capability in information technology, and learning how to learn. Small to medium size enterprise employers also emphasised that they need employees to operate effectively in the workplace from the first day and graduates also need to be flexible and responsive.

An extensive report on work placements conducted by Harvey *et al.* (1997) concluded:

If there was to be a single recommendation to come from the research, it would be to encourage all undergraduate programmes to offer students an option of a year-long work placement and employers to be less reluctant to provide placement opportunities.

Similarly, a more recent report by Johnson and Burden (2003: 39) concerning young people, their employability, and the processes of induction into the workplace concludes that:

Many of the employability skills that employers are seeking can only be learned in 'real life' situations, even on a temporary basis such as work placements of two or three weeks. There is a limit to the extent to which educational establishments can 'teach' the necessary skills and attributes, even where extensive efforts are made to simulate the work situation.

Little (2000) observed that most curriculum frameworks against which learning from work experience are mapped identified a range of skills, including personal and social skills, communication, problem solving, creativity and organisational skills. Later research by Little and Harvey (2006) noted that the explicit identification of these skills seems to serve as a useful prompt to students and employers to address these in discussions about suitable tasks and activities for a work placement. This summarises much of the approach of the available literature which adopts a skill development approach oriented to the workplace. There is less reporting on the extent to which there is a positive transfer of learning from the placement to subsequent stages of an individual's learning through the taught programme of study.

1.2 What do People Learn at Work?

Knowledge creation and the deployment of new knowledge in the workplace have given rise to the workplace itself being recognised as a site of learning and knowledge production. This concept is an integral feature of the 'knowledge economy'. Brennan (2005) suggests that, if higher education is to continue to make a contribution to the knowledge economy, collaborative activities based in and around the workplace must be included.

There has been a considerable shift in the way individual learning and development is understood and characterised. There has also been a move from identifying training needs to identifying learning needs, suggesting that development is owned by the student with the need, rather than by the trainer seeking to satisfy that need (Nikolou-Walker, 2008). In other words, learning is demand led rather than provider driven. This has implications for whoever identifies the needs and the way that those needs are met. Current thinking suggests that needs are best developed by a partnership between the individual and the organisation, and that the methods of meeting these needs are not limited to formal courses, but also depend on a wide range of on-the-job development methods and distance or e-learning approaches. Recent studies have summarised that people learn at work as follows:

- By doing the job itself;
 - Through cooperating and interacting with colleagues;
 - Through working with clients;
 - By tackling challenging and new tasks;
 - By reflecting on and evaluating one's work experiences;
 - Through formal education;
 - Through extra-work contexts.;
- (Heikkila, 2006; Tikkamaki, 2006; Billett *et al.*, 2005; Collin and Valleala, 2005).

Irish research conducted by Garavan *et al.* (2003: 3-4) viewed learning as a process rather than simply an outcome. They suggest that learning is now likely to embrace the following ideas:

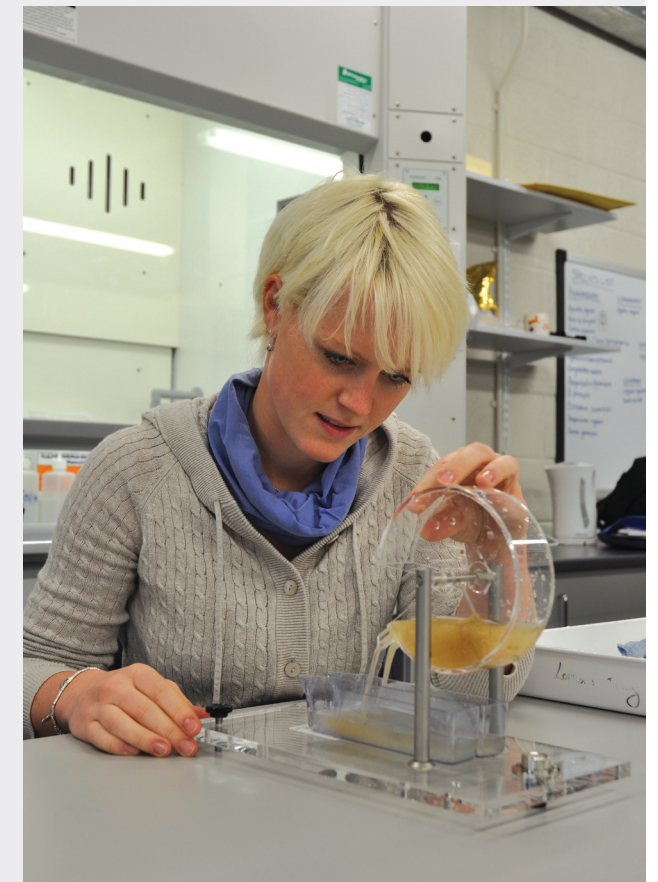
- Learning is not just about knowledge. It is also about skills, insights, beliefs, values, attitudes, habits, feelings, wisdom, shared understandings, and self-awareness;
- Learning outcomes can be incremental (building gradually on what has already been learned) or transformational (changing ways of being, thinking, feeling and action);
- Transformational learning, for some students and organisations, may be a struggle, may take time, and may involve conflicts over aims and outcomes;
- By its very nature, learning is essentially individual, but it can also be collectively generated in teams and organisations;
- There is no one right way to learn for everybody and for every situation;
- Questioning, listening, challenging, and enquiring are crucially important to effective learning;
- The learning process occurs inside the person, but making the outcomes explicit, and sharing them with others, adds value to the learning;
- When the learning process is self-managed, it becomes more effective.

The articulation of clear learning outcomes is considered to be a central feature of any type of learning. A statement of learning outcomes associated with the placement provides students with an understanding of what is trying to be accomplished.

Eraut (2004), after developing a typology of learning outcomes at work, summarised that there is little that people cannot learn at work. The typology includes the following categories of learning outcomes:

- (i) Task performance, including subcategories such as speed and fluency, range of skills required and collaborative work;
- (ii) Awareness and understanding, involving understanding of colleagues, contexts and situations, of one's own organisation, problems, risks etc.;
- (iii) Personal development with aspects such as self-evaluation and management, handling emotions, building and sustaining relationships, and the ability to learn from experience;
- (iv) Teamwork with subcategories such as collaborative work, and joint planning and problem solving;
- (v) Role performance, including leadership, supervisory role, delegation, crisis management etc.;
- (vi) Academic knowledge and skills, such as assessing formal knowledge, research-based practice, theoretical thinking and using knowledge sources;
- (vii) Decision making and problem solving, involving, for example, dealing with complexity, group decision making, and decision making under conditions of pressure; and
- (viii) Judgement, including quality of performance, output and outcomes, priorities, value issues and levels of risk.

It is clear from the above learning outcomes that individuals learn by working with their colleagues. Group working, in one way or another, promotes knowledge exchange and the sharing of expertise, thus enhancing learning by individuals. Furthermore, it has been argued that not only individuals but also groups can learn in organisations. The ability to learn in collaboration with other people, both within and outside an organisation, often makes the difference between success and failure. According to Slotte and Tynjala (2003), employees who cannot network with others to share and construct knowledge will fall visibly behind their peers in the possession of such abilities. Interaction between novices and experts is also of crucial importance in learning at work. Overall, individual and group learning in the workplace can be characterised as a highly social activity which requires interaction and dialogue, requires the kinds of challenges that make learning necessary, and involves reflection on past experiences and the planning of future activities.



1.3 Work Placements and Learning

There is a widespread consensus in the work placement literature that just knowing applicable theory is not enough: students must know when and how the theory is to be applied (Clarke and Winch, 2004). It is further suggested that when more self-directed learning becomes possible outside of the classroom, students are encouraged to find creative responses to situations, rather than relying on the stereotypic or patterned responses that classroom role-plays and simulations often generate (Regehr *et al.*, 2002).

Bandura's social learning theory outlined three requirements for people to learn and model behaviour: retention (remembering what one observed), reproduction (ability to reproduce the behaviour), and motivation (good reason to want to adopt the behaviour):

Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behaviour is learned observationally through modelling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviours are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action (Bandura, 1977: 22).

Bandura argued that learning is embedded within activity, context and culture, but social interaction and collaboration are also essential components of learning. He further observed that students become involved in a 'community of practice' which embodies certain beliefs and behaviours to be acquired. As the beginner or novice moves from the periphery of a community to its centre, he or she becomes more active and engaged within the culture and eventually assumes the role of an expert.

Extensive research by Eraut (2007a, 2007b, 2004) on how individuals learn at work, particularly in the early stages of their careers, concluded that not only do people learn in different ways, but they also learn different things. Eraut suggested that placements provide contexts for learning of a very different kind from those provided within third-level institutions, but he warned that, unlike in teaching organisations, learning is not the main aim of most workplaces. He observed that in most workplaces learning is informal and occurs as a by-product of engaging in work processes and activities. Newcomers often have to learn 'how we do things here' without being given any specific objectives or advice.

In their research on workplace learning, Boud and Middleton (2003) single out three "significant areas of informal learning": mastery of organisational processes, negotiating the political, and dealing with the atypical. They believe that this list neatly captures the areas of understanding that cannot be learnt in the de-situated, de-contextualised environment of the educational classroom. They further suggest that in the classroom both the practical world providing the object of academic study and the institutional structure of the educational organisation itself are kept largely at bay, as the classroom shields students from institutional politics in the practical as well as organisational fields. They believe that the learning challenges of the classroom are not subject to the urgency and practical imperatives impressed upon real-life situations and organisational contexts. Their research concluded that the practical judgement required to deal with these three dimensions of social life is best gained informally through participation in social life.

Learning about and within the workplace as an institution, including its politics and its potential points of breakdown, is not simply an aspect of work that needs to be learnt to 'do the job', but also a context for developing new understandings and approaches to learning and to life itself.

A number of other researchers have also explored the concept of informal learning and concluded that:

Informal learning should no longer be regarded as an inferior form of learning whose main purpose is to act as the precursor of formal learning; it needs to be seen as fundamental, necessary and valuable in its own right, at times directly relevant to employment and at other times not relevant at all (Coffield, 2000: 8).

We must move away from a view of education as a rite of passage involving the acquisition of enough knowledge and qualifications to acquire an adult station in life. The point of education should not be to inculcate a body of knowledge, but to develop capabilities: the basic ones of literacy and numeracy as well as the capability to act responsibly towards others, to take initiative and to work creatively and collaboratively. The most important capability and the one which traditional education is worst at creating is the ability and yearning to carry on learning. Too much schooling kills off a desire to learn. Schools and universities should become more like hubs of learning, within the community, capable of extending into the community. More learning needs to be done at home, in offices and kitchens, in the contexts where knowledge is deployed to solve problems and add value to people's lives (Leadbeater, 2000: 111-12).


Empirical research conducted by Cheetham and Chivers (2001) attest to the wide variety of ways in which individuals acquire competence. They suggest that much of the learning required to attain full professional competence actually takes place after the completion of formal education. They go further by adding that, beyond initial qualification, usually via a combination of formal education and structured training, most professionals evidently progress their professional learning via informal and incidental learning, with little if any emphasis on formally organised learning. This, they conclude, highlights the critical importance of informal learning.

The terms 'work-based', 'work related' and 'workplace learning' are used interchangeably in the research literature. Levy *et al.* (1989) define work-based learning as "linking learning to the work role" and identify three inter-related components, each of which provided an essential contribution to learning:

- Structuring learning in the workplace;
- Providing on-the-job learning and training opportunities;
- Identifying and providing relevant off-job training and learning opportunities.

The term cooperative education is also used to describe this approach to learning. In addition to these terms, 'service learning' is used in North America to refer to community based experiences that are linked to academic studies. All of these learning experiences are designed to enable students to learn from their working environment. Seagreaves *et al.* (1996) further developed the idea of work-based learning and suggested that linking learning to the requirements of people's jobs has three strands:

- Learning for work: to increase student employability;
- Learning at work: this strand relates to an individual's activities undertaken as part of their job role and includes delivery in the workplace of at least some components of the course, and flexibility over time and assessment arrangements;
- Learning through work: learning is centred on and through the work environment.



Of these, arguably 'learning through work', relates most closely to the role of professional work placements: i.e. students learn and test their skills for the profession by 'doing the job' under supervision. This is distinct from simply gaining experience and also fulfils the conditions of 'being an employee', albeit a closely supervised one.

Illeris (2002), in his general theory of learning argued that work placements offer students three dimensions of learning: the emotional, the social, and the cognitive, which he believes must be taken into account for all learning. Illeris (2007) further argued that all learning always includes these three dimensions: the content dimension of knowledge, understandings, skills, abilities, and attitudes; the incentive dimension of emotion, feelings, motivation and volition; and the social dimension of interaction, communication and cooperation. He also commented on the significance of the interplay of these dimensions, as "influences received from the environment are socially co-determined" (Illeris, 2004: 434). Other theorists such as Kolb (1984) also acknowledged the value of learning outside the classroom, where there are new challenges to practice and to reflect on their outcomes. Kolb also highlighted the socio-cultural context of learning and emphasised the roles of colleagues and workplace mentors in student learning in work placements.

Building on earlier work by John Dewey and Kurt Levin, American educational theorist David Kolb's experiential learning model is one of the most familiar learning theories. He argued that "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (1984: 38). The theory presents a cyclical model of learning, consisting of four stages:

- Concrete experience (doing);
- Reflective observation (observing);
- Abstract conceptualisation (thinking);
- Active experimentation (planning).

Kolb lists the essential characteristics of experiential learning as follows:

- A process model as opposed to a product model of learning;
- A continuous process grounded in experiences;
- The resolution of conflicts between diametrically opposed adaptations to the world;
- A holistic process;
- Transactions between the person and the environment;
- The process of creating knowledge.

Kolb's four-stage learning cycle shows how experience is translated through reflection into concepts, which in turn are used as guides for active experimentation and the choice of new experiences. The first stage, concrete experience, is where the student actively experiences an activity such as a lab session or field work. The second stage, reflective observation, is when the student consciously reflects back on that experience. The third stage, abstract conceptualisation, is where the student attempts to conceptualise a theory or model of what is observed. The fourth stage, active experimentation, is where the student is trying to plan how to test a model or theory or to plan for a forthcoming experience.

In summary, Kolb believes that reflection is an essential element of learning. The practice of reflection has also been highlighted by Fink (1999) who terms reflection as "dialogue with self" in his model of active learning. This is seen as an essential skill that all students need to acquire if they are to become active learners. The work of Schön (1987) has gained prominence in nursing education where reflective practice is a core element of all courses, but his research applies to all work-based learning and, it could be argued, to all learning situations. Schön believes that

unless students reflect on their progress they will not learn to correct their mistakes and feedback will become merely a formulaic activity.

Work placements provide positive opportunities for learning in this manner, as one of the main aims of all work placements is to promote reasoning, analytical, and evaluative abilities in students through reflective practice. Students will develop reflective abilities during the course of their learning on placement. Boud *et al.* (1985) also believe that reflective practice is an important feature in work placements as it features the individual and his or her experiences, leading to a new conceptual perspective or understanding. They have defined reflective practice as:

A generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations (Boud *et al.*, 1985: 19).

Boud *et al.* proposed a three-stage model of the reflection process focusing on: returning to the experience, attending to feelings connected with the experience, and re-evaluating the experience through recognising implications and outcomes. This model has subsequently been extended into a model for facilitating learning from experience. The features of the model include the following: reflection is grounded in the personal foundation of experience of the student, that is, those experiences which have shaped the person and have helped to create the person he or she is now, and their intent which gives a particular focus to their learning in any particular context. Learning occurs through the interaction of the person with his or her material and human environment — the learning milieu — and is assisted through the student giving attention to noticing what is happening in their internal and external environments, intervening in various ways to influence themselves and the environment in which they are operating and reflecting on their actions continually to modify their behaviour.

Similarly, more recent research conducted by Blackwell *et al.* (2001) added that work experience itself is not necessarily intrinsically beneficial, but, it is the learning that an individual derives from the experience that is important. They further observed that reflection is an essential complement to learning at work, and argued that good quality work-based learning has six characteristics:

- Stakeholders — students, employers, academic staff, and employees — all understand the underlying intentions. It is meaningful;
- The quality of work experience is greatly enhanced by prior induction and briefing for all concerned; by facilitation of ongoing reflection; by debriefing, reflection and identification of outcomes. Learning is the goal;
- Work experience is accredited so that it is taken seriously;
- Formative assessment is used to support the process of learning from work experience;
- Students build up a work-experience portfolio;
- Students can say what they have learned, provide illustrations and, if need be, commentary. There is effective reflection.

Little (2006) concurs on the importance of reflection and suggests that if learning opportunities are to be maximised in 'non-traditional' forms of work experience, then students need some kind of structure and support in order that they reflect upon and articulate the learning. Little summarised that it is generally recognised that if the learning from work experience is planned and intentional from the outset it is easier for students to reflect on it and to identify what has been learned.

1.4 Benefits of Work Placements

Many third-level institutions worldwide regard work placement experience for undergraduates as a key contributor to high academic standards and to the employability of their graduates (Reddy and Moores, 2006; Little and Harvey, 2006). Research also shows how students themselves value placements. Respondents from different disciplines and from diverse industrial experiences confirm that work placements enhanced their understanding of career choices and provided a tangible link between theory and application (Walmsley *et al.*, 2006; Neill and Mulholland, 2003; Blackwell *et al.* 2001). Harvey *et al.* 1997) claim that many of the benefits from placements cannot be measured by conventional academic methods and that there is significant anecdotal evidence concerning the benefits of work experience in general.

While participating in the delivery of a traditional third-level programme, academics and students may realise that they have not had the opportunity to relate their learning to real practice. Where this is the case, students may have missed an important part of the educative learning possibilities of the working environment that they plan to enter. Tucker (2006) summarised that, in a work environment, students can engage in real work practices, learn how to communicate with colleagues and to deal with work related problems. Learning becomes less theory based and more practical and contextual.

It is now widely accepted by educationalists that work placements provide a unique and valuable learning experience for students, particularly providing students with a range of personal experiences that relate to and integrate with their prior academic experiences, and placements are seen to encourage students to participate in the adult world of work (Daloz Parks, 2001). 'Real world' processes, including people and problems with which the student can engage, are encountered within the work environment (Ayling, 2006). Exposure to actual or simulated workplace tasks and problems allows students to experience wide variation in knowledge application, and to recognise the limits of their understanding and how those limits need to be addressed — essential elements for deep learning and for a capacity to deal with novel situations (Bowden, 1997).

Research conducted by Bowes and Harvey (2000) confirmed that students opting for degrees which contain placements are better placed for employment when they graduate compared with students who lack this experience, reflecting the conclusion that "placements are seen by employers and graduate employees as the single most significant missing element of the majority of degree programmes" (Harvey *et al.*, 1997).

What individual students do in the work placement, as well as the nature of the experience and the learning derived from the experience, will vary significantly within the many general descriptions of work placements. In any work placement, some of what the student actually does and therefore what the student learns and how they learn it are primarily determined by the employing organisation and the student's own decisions. The specification of these items at a generic level also typically involves negotiation between the employer, the placement tutor (from the third-level institution), and the student.

Research by Mandilaras (2004) and Gomez *et al.* (2004) explored the correlation between work placements and final degree attainment. The results of their studies showed that:

Participation in the placement scheme significantly increases the chances of obtaining an upper second or higher degree class (Mandilaras, 2004: 39).

*On average, placement students gain an advantage of nearly 4% in their final year performance (Gomez *et al.*, 2004: 373).*

A British Higher Education Academy report on work placements found that:

The overwhelming majority of students perceived positive changes in their approaches to study as a result of the placement experiences. Such changes related both to issues of confidence and motivation to study generally, and to a sense of more active engagement with learning tasks (Little, 2006: 61).

The benefits of work placements have been covered extensively in a study by Harvey, *et al.* (1998). These are summarised as:

Benefits to students

- Working in a setting which puts theory into practice;
- Developing an awareness of workplace culture;
- Appreciation of the rapidly changing world of work;
- Opportunity to develop a range of personal attributes (e.g. time management, self confidence and adaptability);
- Development of key interactive attributes (e.g. team working, interpersonal and communication skills);
- Short-term financial benefits — as some students get paid while on work placement;
- Enhanced employment prospects and the potential for commanding higher wages when starting employment after graduation;
- Assistance in developing career strategies, such as help with career choice, becoming aware of opportunities, and building up a network of contacts;
- In some cases, living and working in another culture.

Benefits to employers

- 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.

Benefits to staff in higher education

- Opportunity for students to see their subject area in practice;
- Satisfaction of seeing students developing and maturing;
- Enhancement of student skills;
- Establishment of links with a wider range of employers, with the potential to bring fresh approaches to HEIs;
- Using employer contacts to ensure that their commercial or industry-related teaching is up-to-date
- Using links to encourage employers to participate on course validation panels in the development of subject areas, to present guest lectures, or to participate in seminars;

- Creation and tailoring of innovative or more applicable work experiences through collaboration with past employers of placement students;
- Developing their expertise in assessment methods by working with employers who have experience in assessing 'employability' skills.

Eraut (2007b) concluded that one of the most important benefits of work placements is working alongside others because it allows students to observe and listen to others at work, and to participate in shared activities. This enables students to learn new practices and perspectives, to become aware of different kinds of knowledge and expertise, and to gain some sense of tacit knowledge implicit in the work place. Learning which is attained in a practice setting is more clearly understood and retained. This mode of learning, which encompasses much observation as well as discussion, is fundamentally important for acquiring the tacit knowledge that underpins routines and intuitive decisions.

1.5 Potential Problems of Work Placement

The process of work experience and placement is complex, involving interactions between the student, the third-level institution, and the employer at a variety of levels. There is a wide range of placement provision, and different participants view, prepare for, and perform their work experience in a variety of ways. It is clear that work experience requires a considerable input of resources to run a placement scheme properly. All stakeholders, however, may not have access to the same level of resource or expertise. Caution must also be taken to avoid viewing work placement as a form of learning where 'any experience is better than no experience' because a poor work placement benefits nobody.

A further potential problem involves the perception of placements. Placements may be viewed as taking time away from the classroom and because of their 'vocational' association may not be regarded as academically legitimate (Crow, 1997).

Work placements, however, are generally enjoyable aspects of the educational programme for the majority of students. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that during the periods of practice-based learning some students can experience anxiety-provoking situations. Although anxiety may be a positive factor that enhances performance, too much anxiety can inhibit student learning. Student anxieties are often centred on fitting into a new unknown environment, getting used to new work colleagues and supervisors, adapting to the as yet undefined new role, and coping with the feeling of being constantly observed. Some students have difficulty in dealing with negative feedback, they may have been placed with work-based supervisors who criticise them, or who are unapproachable and unsupportive. The performance of such students may continue to decline in those environments. These students may be unable to ask for the assistance they need and often fear making mistakes. These difficulties however can be dealt with in a variety of ways, once they have been identified, for example:

- Creating an accepting environment in which learning can take place;
- Communicating any problems about the student's knowledge base, skills, attitudes or behaviours as soon as they are identified;
- Documenting feedback and giving the student a copy;
- Sharing concern with the student and the third-level tutor;
- Establishing measurable objectives for change that are explicit and observable;
- Realising that there are some students who need more time to develop competency.

Harvey *et al.* (1997) also highlighted further potential problems, suggesting that a "protracted period out of an academic culture" may cause difficulties for students in continuing to study after their placement. They further note that "there is a danger that students can be used as cheap labour and their skills under-utilised". This, they conclude, inhibits development and is not good practice.

1.6 Strategic Innovation Fund Aims and Objectives

The Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) is awarded by the Department of Education and Science and is administered by the Higher Education Authority (HEA). SIF is a competitively driven resource stream to implement organisational transformation. The fund is multi-annual, originally planned to amount to €510 million over the period 2006-2013. SIF aims to support innovation, and to foster collaboration between institutions competing for funding to:

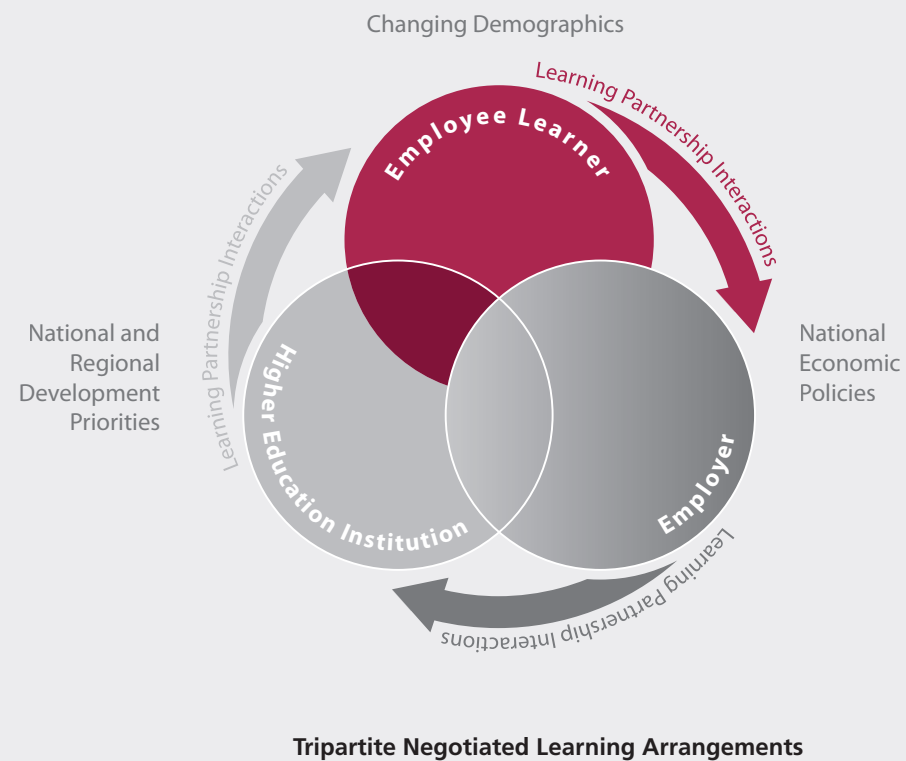
- Incentivise and reward internal restructuring and to reform efforts;
- Promote teaching and learning reforms, including enhanced teaching methods, programme restructuring at third and fourth level, modularisation and e-learning;
- Support quality improvement initiatives aimed at excellence;
- Promote access, transfer, progression, and to incentivise stronger inter-institutional collaboration in the development and delivery of programmes;
- Provide for improved performance management systems and to meet staff-training and support requirements associated with the reform of structures and the implementation of new processes;
- Implement improved management information systems.

Through the collaborative nature of the projects, new strategic alliances have been developed and supported, providing new impetus for enhanced quality and effectiveness. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) review of HEIs made a compelling case for reform of third- and fourth-level education in Ireland (OECD, 2004). While the sector is acknowledged as an engine for economic development, higher education institutions need to rise to the challenges of increasing their relevance, for example, through promoting access and participation by those already in the workforce. The SIF is an important element in the investment and reform of HEIs to enable them to meet challenges presented by changing social and economic realities while building on their existing strengths. In this way, the projects funded through the SIF are helping the partner institutions towards realising their potential while also improving the learning experience for a diverse range of students at all levels.

1.7 Roadmap for Employment–Academic Partnerships (REAP) Project

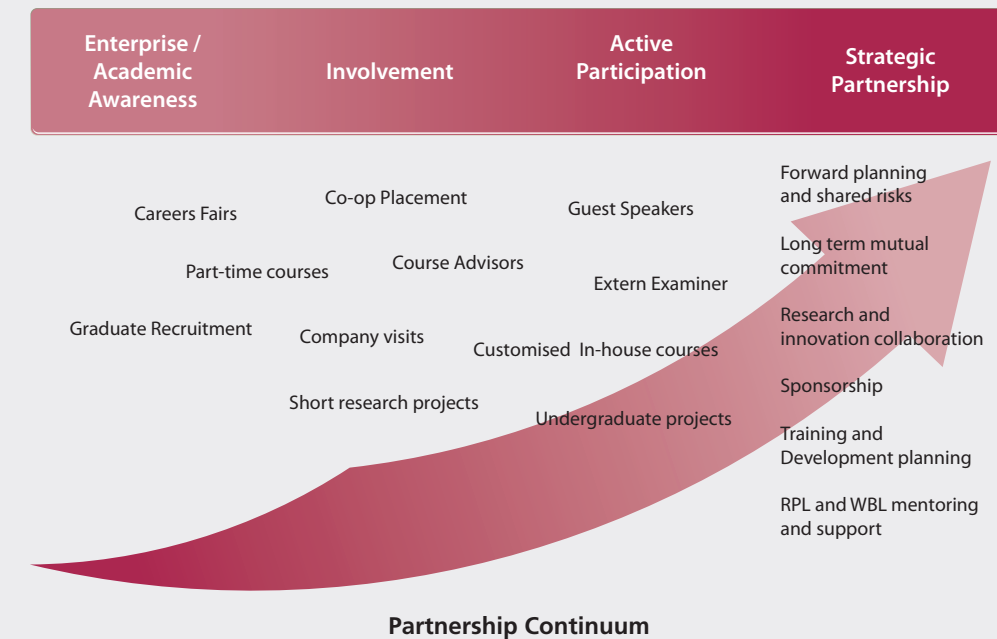
The REAP project is a SIF Cycle 2 collaborative project aimed at developing and validating a model and roadmap for partnership and engagement between HEIs and employers and enterprises. This partnership approach is seen as especially relevant in the context of a dynamically changing economic and demographic environment.

The REAP project is a Cork Institute of Technology-led consortium comprising Athlone Institute of Technology; Dublin Institute of Technology; Institute of Technology, Sligo; Institute of Technology Tallaght; National University of Ireland, Galway; University College, Cork; and Waterford Institute of Technology.



The partnership concept is extended beyond that of the learning partnership. By exploring existing examples of good practice throughout the project consortium and identifying enablers and barriers, a toolkit will be developed to facilitate engagement across the spectrum of potential partnership activities. The impact will be twofold: both HEIs and enterprises will be encouraged to seek out opportunities to engage with each other and to identify any barriers to engagement within their systems and processes. Through the REAP project it is intended that enterprises will view HEIs as key service providers and strategic partners.

The range of potential partnership interactions with some examples is summarised in the following graphic:



Within the range of partnership engagements the REAP work has mainly focused on five different types of interaction:

- Cooperative work placement;
- Specialist targeted course development to meet specific enterprise learning needs;
- Professional postgraduate pathways;
- Academics/researchers contributing within enterprises;
- Opportunities for professional employers/employees to contribute within the academic environment.

The findings to date show that successful and sustainable partnerships need 'resources, relationships, and realistic objectives'. The key HEI enablers include:

- Clear point of contact and good communication;
- Flexible and responsive administrative procedures and processes;
- Integration and valuing of partnership activities at the core of the institution.

The literature on partnership reports barriers in terms of perceived inaccessibility and inflexibility of the HEI in dealing with enterprise needs. However, the experience of successful partnerships, reviewed through the project, has provided ample evidence that these barriers can be overcome.

REAP Objectives on Work Placement

In reviewing the continuum of potential engagement activity the REAP project proposal recognised that the undergraduate placement efforts present an 'entry-level' partnership mechanism that enhances mutual understanding and lays the groundwork for more cooperation and involvement across the learning and research spectrum.

Undergraduate placements form an important part of the learning experience in many programmes; nevertheless, the quality of the experience varies widely and a range of approaches is adopted for awarding credits and assessing learning outcomes. A work plan was agreed involving the collaboration of the REAP project partners to share existing practice and to work together to identify good practice which could then be disseminated broadly. The REAP consortium agreed to:

- Review current operating practice;
- Compile experiences from the employer, student and academic perspectives;
- Draft learning agreements including agreed statements of expectations, learning outcomes, assessment methodology — aligned with examination structures and consistent with the appropriate NQAI descriptors;
- Publish agreed aligned guidelines for student, employer, academic and workplace mentors;
- Trial the agreed guidelines and structures.

1.8 Structure of the Report

The report is divided into a number of different sections. The first section serves as a general introduction and provides a background to the report. This section introduces the concept of work placement, highlighting the links between work placement and employability skills. Aspects of learning at work are also explored. Throughout the report, work placement is examined from the three perspectives of students, employers, and higher education institutions. While briefly outlining the aims and objectives of the Strategic Innovation Fund, the first section focuses in particular on the REAP project.

The second section presents the collective findings of the REAP working-group members on the practices of work placement. This includes a summary of the initial desk research conducted by working group members, as well as a summary of the empirical research conducted with students, employers, and higher education staff. A number of primary research methods were used to collect the data. Seminars were organised with higher education staff in order to capture their views on current practices of work placement. The opinions of a number of employers who provided work placements were sought through surveys and networking events. The opinions of students who had returned to college after completing work placements were collected through various focus groups in each of the REAP partner third-level institutions. The practice on placement was further explored through the completion of detailed case study templates by the project partners. The third section presents a brief conclusion to the report.

The report also contains a number of appendices that were developed by members of the REAP working group from the research conducted. Appendix A presents placement guidelines for higher education institutions, employers, and students for each of the three stages of the placement activity — pre-placement, during placement, and post-placement. These guidelines provide a useful checklist for each of the stakeholders in the placement process.

The guidelines in Appendix A arising from the research findings were used to inform the development of outline 'placement packs' for the student and the employer. The Student Placement pack presented in Appendix B includes a three-way learning agreement comprising placement learning outcomes and assessment strategy, job specification, and contact details and sign off. It also includes a workplace induction checklist, workplace learning guide, and an evaluation of the placement process from the student perspective. Appendix C presents the Employer Placement pack which again includes the three way learning agreement, a workplace induction checklist, appraisal of the student, and an evaluation of the placement process from the employer perspective.

In Appendix D the issue of the management and assessment of learning gained in the placement experience is considered. The self-assessment and recognition of the learning by the student as well as the provision of relevant and timely feedback by the academic advisor is considered. The use of an on-line journal is explored.

Appendix E presents an overview of the REAP project working group.



2 REAP Objectives on Work Placement

This chapter summarises the work conducted under the REAP project, illustrating existing practice in work placement and gathering input and experiences from a variety of sources. The research and analysis underpins the development of the practice guidelines and recommendations included in this report.

Initially, desk-based research was undertaken to examine the level of undergraduate work placement currently in educational programmes in Irish third-level institutions. This research focused on non-clinical placements, where the integration of placement into the programme is driven by the programme design team and not by regulatory or professional standards. The evolution of practice and the underlying academic–employer relationship varies significantly between the clinical placement programmes and the non-clinical programmes. Buckley and El Amoud (2010) examined the online course catalogues of all the Irish HEIs in order to compile a list of undergraduate courses that included work placement. They identified 411 courses that included a work-placement element among 23 HEIs, with 10,577 students undertaking placement in non-clinical programmes on an annual basis and almost 80% of these students enrolled on level 8 programmes.

Their research highlights significant variance in the number of programmes that include placement as well as significant variance in the prevalence of placement in the different academic disciplines. Placement duration was found to vary from less than two months to more than six months, with the number of credits available for the placement experience generally, but not always, reflecting the duration of the work. Only 36% of the Higher Education Staff who responded indicated that all their placements were paid, with the majority of responses suggesting that placements were a mixture of both paid and unpaid. Many respondents also noted that, while students on their placement programmes were generally paid in previous years, it has proven a lot more difficult to secure paid placements in the current year, and in some cases, employers would take students only if they did not have to pay them.

Further research by Kennedy Burke *et al.* (2010) among 117 students in the School of Tourism at the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) explored their perceptions of the Irish tourism industry, based on their placement experience, and conversely the industry’s perception of placement. The DIT students were placed in 57 diverse industry organisations during their placements. Ninety-one per cent of students either ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that work placement was a valuable learning experience, with 78% ‘agreeing’ or ‘strongly agreeing’ that they were satisfied that their learning objectives were achieved. Eighty-four per cent ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that they enjoyed their placement.

The research also involved consultation with representatives from the tourism industry in Ireland who participate in the placement programme. The main findings from the research with industry representatives highlighted the importance of students being prepared for the real business world, a general need to improve business language in terms of writing business emails, and the need for social skills including communication, punctuality, and work dress code.

Further consultation took place with HEIs offering work placement as part of their tourism programmes. The findings illustrated considerable variation in the management of placements among the different third-level institutions represented.

Some HEIs have dedicated placement officers; others have a dedicated office managed by administrative staff, while in other colleges members of academic staff manage the entire placement process. Higher education representatives showed a strong level of interest in becoming part of a higher education placement network. It was

suggested that the network might act as a consultative or research body with a remit to ensure best practice in relation to placement.

During the course of the REAP project, the third-level project partners compiled a wide-ranging summary of employers’, students’ HEIs’ views of existing placement practice, as well as summarising their recommendations and suggestions for improvements. A number of different methodologies were used to collate and analyse information, and the various sources of information are described and summarised in this chapter. In all cases, the information sought was intended to inform the partners on the current situation of work placements, to seek out effective practice and to identify barriers to and enablers of the spread of good practice throughout the third-level sector in Ireland.

2.1 Higher Education Staff Views on Work Placement

A number of seminars were arranged by the REAP project team for staff involved in placement and these seminars were attended by over 70 representatives from 14 Irish HEIs. The seminars were recorded and transcribed and key insights from work-placement practitioners in the HEIs were identified, from the contributions to these seminars. The need for a single forum for the exchange of views was identified which led to the establishment of a national online forum.

It was agreed that the research focus should examine the structures and supports for placement including the planning phase and the management of the process. In order to align with SIF objectives the project team needed to focus on the structural issues around good practice in the placement process. To achieve this each of the project partners was asked to explore in detail a small number of specific instances of placement within their particular institution. The exploration was based around a detailed template addressing not just the practical elements of the placement but also the motivation for the inclusion of placement into the programme design, the preparation, planning, and negotiation phases of the placement as well as the management of the placement in practice. A detailed template was drawn up by the project team following consideration of the experiences shared through the seminars. These mini ‘case studies’ contributed to the understanding of current practice as well as to the development of guidelines and recommendations for future work-placement activity.

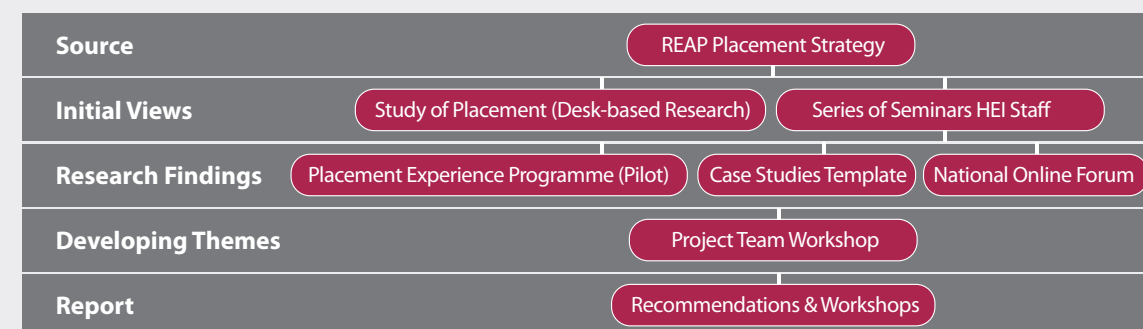


Figure 1: HEI data collection process

Overview of the HEI Findings

The issues that were raised through the seminars, template responses, and fora can be summarised as follows:

- Importance of placement pedagogically;
- Mandatory requirement versus optional bonus;
- Variety and quality of placements;
- Alternatives to placement;
- Duration of placement;
- Number of credits;
- Assessment strategies, e.g., different grades or else pass/fail – linked to learning outcomes and credits;
- Difficulty in securing placement;
- Sourcing and securing international placements;
- Sourcing and securing placements for international students;
- Paid versus unpaid;
- Quality and suitability of available placements;
- Management of the placement process;
- Preparation of student and employer for placement;
- Resourcing of the placement process;
- IT support to manage the placement learning outcomes and competency acquisition.

Importance of the Placement

All third-level representatives agreed that the placement experience adds significant value and learning within the framework of an academic programme:

I believe that all educational institutions have a responsibility to prepare their students for the workplace and a major challenge for all educators is how you bridge the gap between their academic learning and the application of that learning in the workplace environment.

The current trend for third-level institutions is to introduce placement within more programmes and across more disciplines. This aligns well with the employer view that placement contributes to the overall employability of the graduate. All indicators point to the value that course designers place on interaction with the professional workplace in the many disciplines and on the opportunities that work placement provides to the student in terms of their personal career development.

Alternatives to Placement

There was considerable discussion about the desirability of mandatory placement in course design. This gave rise to consideration of alternatives where a placement cannot be secured and the equivalence of pedagogical value of alternatives where they are included in the curricular development process.

This is an applied programme and hands-on practical experience is essential in developing skills and competences required by the sector.

In most cases, alternatives to placement existed but these tended to have arisen *ad hoc* to meet specific needs rather than having been planned or aligned with the course learning objectives. Many partners reported a research project option for those students for whom placement could not be secured. In some cases, this involved working in a structured way within an established research community or centre in the institution, and in other cases, it

involved completing an individual project in a laboratory under the supervision of an academic staff member. It might be argued that the former of these is a 'work placement' within a research group, which happens to be on campus, where there will be workplace norms that differ from the academic institution norms, while the latter can be seen more as an individual effort that does not provide an exposure to a 'workplace'.

In other cases, modules and tutorials are developed as a substitute for the placement semester. This means that these students do not benefit from an opportunity to gain learning outcomes associated with placements, typically resulting in a lesser learning experience for them.

In one of the partner institutions a model had been developed for a flexible semester that allowed a number of options, all with the same top level learning outcomes. These options include work placement, study abroad, new business initiative or community/voluntary work. The structure developed includes appropriate preparation and assessment for each of the different options.

Duration and Credits

The optimum duration of the placement and the academic credits associated with the placement experience raised the question of assessing the learning outcomes associated with learning in the workplace and assessing the validity of a variety of assessment methodologies. There is a significant variation in the higher education sector in relation to the duration of placements and the credits awarded for placement activities. For instance, 13 weeks of placement can attract between 10 and 30 credits. In some cases, the placement experience is assessed on the basis of pass or fail criteria with no credit applied. In some institutions, the successful completion of a learning experience or the completion of a reflective piece, where the student recognises and evidences their learning, is considered and the associated credit is awarded without grading. In other situations, there is an assessment process of the experiential learning with a view to awarding grades to the learning achieved. The challenge in the assessment process is the separation of the learning experience or content of the learning from the setting in which the learning has been achieved. The context of the learning and the very many different workplace settings tends to make a comparative analysis in the level of achievement of learning outcomes very difficult.


Placement is an essential component of the course. It allows students to gain experience and to apply theory to practice with a view to future employability.

In general, higher education providers acknowledged that placements need to be of significant duration in order to provide reasonable outcomes. This concurred with the views of employers who strongly endorsed that durations should be greater than six months.

Difficulty in Sourcing and Securing Work Placements

There was much concern about the difficulties associated with finding placements for a growing cohort of students in more challenging economic times. Staff reported that employers are currently more unwilling to take students, even on an unpaid basis, who might be seen as additional headcount during times of retrenchment. The development of a strong partnership approach to education, where placement is viewed as an important part of the overall engagement continuum and where employers can benefit from their significant role in the education process, may lay the groundwork for more involvement by employers. Concern was expressed that perhaps the criteria for the selection of placements, and the necessity to ensure that the placement can offer the learning that the student expects to attain, might be overlooked as placements become more difficult to source.

The consideration of remuneration, if any, during student placement, revealed a broad spread of practice. There are disciplines in which placements are generally unpaid, and those in which placements are paid, and those that



have been paid until recently, due to the economic downturn, are now more likely to be unpaid. In situations where placement is paid there is a variety of remuneration rates from a below minimum wage stipend to the equivalent of a regular salary for the duration. Payment raises the questions of whether this is primarily a learning experience or an earning one. The expectation of the employer of the student's ability and the responsibilities placed on the student varied greatly so it might be expected that the payment would be widely varying also.

We need to move to a situation where we have a communal understanding of the student situation with regard to insurance and employee–employer rights because there were descriptions of 70-hour unpaid placements in one of the discussions today. Ethically that has to be questionable.

Placements Abroad

Many programmes offer opportunities for students in securing placements abroad and this is helpful where there is difficulty in placing students in Irish companies. The challenges and considerations involved finding companies willing to accept Irish students. One suggestion involved partnering with IDA or Enterprise Ireland to leverage their international offices to help identify possible partner organisations. Where students are placed overseas many of them are with international companies that have Irish offices providing local contact and partnership, facilitating this development.

Rather than spreading the contacts over a huge base it might be better to pick a location and zone in on it and build a network of contacts and companies there.

Where there are travel and subsistence costs associated with taking advantage of an overseas placement, concern was expressed that this might propagate social inequities in the education system. From the academic institution perspective the question of greater costs can arise for managing the international placement. From the student perspective the availability of support networks on the ground is important.

Students are happy to go abroad when there are two or three students from their institution or where they have relatives or contacts but they're less inclined to go if there's one of them going to a place alone.

We may be limited in our scope to secure international placements because of language restrictions and perhaps this is something that we need to address in all of our programmes.

Additional difficulties have been reported in finding placements for non-EU students. In some cases, employers were reluctant to consider these students, as one of the motivations for employers in taking students on placement is that they see this as an important part of their recruitment process and in the case of non-EU students they believe they may not be eligible for work in Ireland on completing their course. Difficulty with work permits, poorer communication ability, and employment restrictions are concerns reported from employers about the non-EU cohort of students.

This isn't going to go away; each of our institutions is looking more and more towards international students, so this is a problem that is going to get bigger.

Management of the Placement Process

Through the REAP project a number of staff exchanges were facilitated to encourage the sharing of views and sharing of experiences among those involved in the placement process at third level. It is worth noting that the practice of management and planning of the placement experience varies significantly within individual institutions and between different institutions. In some cases, central resources are dedicated to sourcing, planning, and managing the placement. In other cases, the resources are allocated at course and departmental level, with academic staff finding and managing placements for students.

In our own university the drive is to increase placement in lots of courses, but again we need resources, we need to go to the various Chambers Ireland, Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development (CIPD) and IBEC events and develop the networks, and without a budget that starts to get difficult.

In centralised models all those involved in placement operations and management are located in a single location, with the advantage of a single placement budget and administration efficiency and consistency of approach. This may also have advantages from the employer perspective because the employer has a clear contact point with the central placement resource. There may be drawbacks to this approach as it may lead to diminished interaction between the placement and the academic staff, with the risk of undermining the academic value of the placement within the particular programme. This may also have the effect of lessening the opportunities for direct interaction and for further engagement between academic staff and the workplaces.

In a distributed model the placement operation, planning and management is situated within the relevant academic department. This allows the placement experience to be more tightly integrated into the relevant academic department, with more direct involvement in the placement by the faculty staff. The interaction between the placement staff and the employer can have direct benefits that feed back into the curriculum or lead to additional opportunities. The potential for consistency and efficiencies of scale is lost in this model, however, and it can also lead to competition between different programme areas to find placements.

We have a dedicated resource in the School of Business for placement.

Offers are returned to the university and coordinated by the practice education coordinator. An annual database of all involved is kept updated.

A structure which combines the advantages of the centralised and decentralised model can be developed where a central resource allows efficiencies of scale in the operation of some elements of placement administration and preparation while keeping the responsibility for the operation within academic departments. The appropriate structure for a particular institution will depend on the scale of the placement activity and the variety of the disciplines in which placements are sought.

The whole issue of management of placement differs considerably across the colleges: dedicated placement officers; dedicated links offices with a purely administrative focus; people who have responsibility for placement as part of their administrative work; and, in most cases, a combination of both a dedicated placement officer and academic staff.

Proper management of the placement process and the preparation of participants for placement are essential to the quality and value of the learning experience. The preparation from the student perspective varies from a series of seminars and workshops, which assist a student in securing a placement through CV preparation and

interview techniques, to a planned learning pathway which introduces the student to the language and priorities of the workplace and acts as a preparation for the professional practice in which they might expect to be immersed. Generally, the student submits an application and a CV and is interviewed by the employer in order to secure the placement.

Students are well briefed in class and also through an induction day. They receive help in obtaining their documentation and Garda clearance.

Some things we could do better include more research on the industry and organisation, and possibly a site visit to the placement organisation.

In terms of defined learning expectations, all instances of placement that were explored in depth reported clearly defined learning outcomes which the student could see as a clear outline of the learning that they are expected to achieve in the process. In some cases, the learning outcomes are broadly stated and reasonably generic, addressing communication skills, ability to work in teams, becoming a self-directed learner and in other cases, the outcomes address the application of the specific theoretical knowledge within the discipline.

Preparing the employer for the placement experience tended to be less formally addressed by the project partner institutions. In many cases, employers have worked with the higher education provider over many years, informally building relationships to support and facilitate the placement process. Individual relationships between academic institutions seeking student placements in a particular discipline and the employer partner tended to be strong, and these relationships were frequently centred on a network of graduates within the workplace. In some cases, a prepared manual with a statement of the expectations of all parties — employer, student, and higher education provider — is made available. This was particularly evident within the Social Care area where the placement experience tends to be more regulated than within the Science, Business, and Engineering disciplines.

We have a briefing day and we offer training to staff involved in the placement process.

Often there is no formal placement agreement or baseline contract between the parties and no formal learning agreement. Most of the HEIs, however, reported positive long-standing relationships with employers. Within the workplace there is usually a recognised 'supervisor' or 'mentor' who is the point of contact for the student and the higher education staff. Visits, emails and telephone calls are usually the methods used to monitor and maintain the contact before and during the placement. In some cases, the workplace supervisor is provided with training from the academic partner to explain and support their supervisor role.

From the HEIs perspective the management of the process raises concerns about available resources. Sharing of resources and expertise is not commonplace within the institutions. In many cases, for example, those responsible for placing Business students and those responsible for placing Engineering students from the same institution into the same enterprise have no formal communication process. Resources allocated to the placement process were reported to place limitations on the range of placements available to students.

Because of funding limitations, supervisors were only allowed to place students within a particular area so that additional funding would not have to be applied for travel expenses.

During the course of the REAP project, the use of information technology systems to support the work placement learning and to assist the student in compiling their learning portfolio was explored. Information technology systems

have a role in the planning phase of the placement as they force deeper consideration of the stated learning outcomes and perhaps a restatement of the learning outcomes into the underlying competences including a consideration of how the competency might be evidenced.

Summary

HEI staff agree that placement makes a valuable contribution to the educational process these benefits and the main concerns raised are summarised in the following graphic:

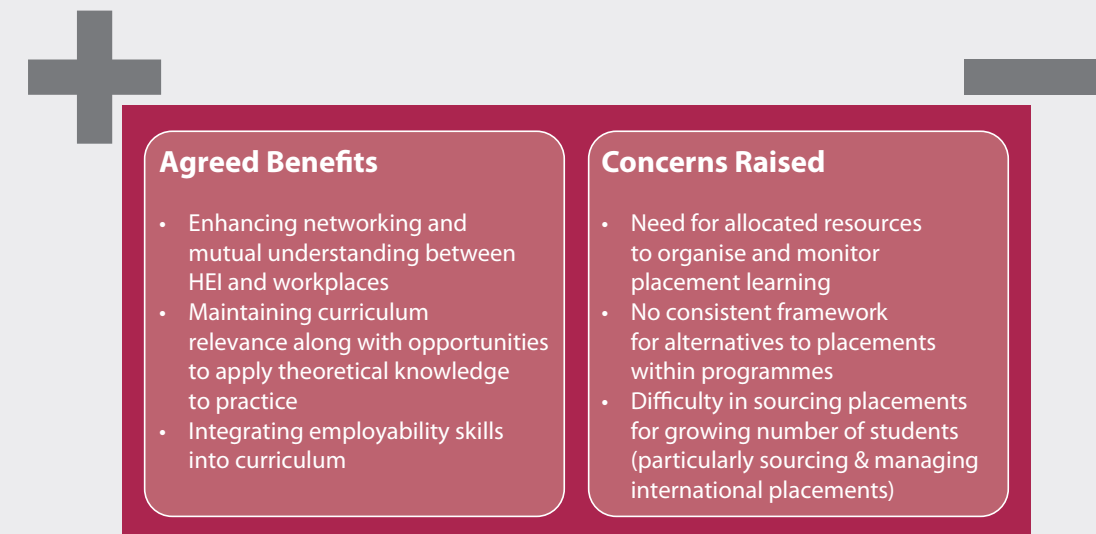


Figure 2: Summary of higher education staff views on work placement

2.2 Employers' Views on Work Placement

The employers' view on placement was developed from a number of different sources. A short set of questions was designed to explore employers' views of the benefit of placement to their organisations, and the benefits to students, together with investigating methods through which the placement process might be improved. The survey was facilitated through Forfás and available through the IBEC website. In addition, all project partners were asked to explore the views of the employers with whom they have contact using the same question set where appropriate.

Project partners contributed a variety of inputs, which were collected through discipline-specific investigations and consultations as well as through institute-wide activities. In some cases, short networking events were held to provide employer representatives with an opportunity to network and to contribute their views orally. Input from the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, including a review of recent reports on sectoral skills needs, illustrated the enterprise view of placements within the training and education spectrum for particular sectors and disciplines. A report by Kennedy Burke *et al.* (2010) also provided a valuable insight into the views of a network of employers in the tourism sector.

In seeking to represent the employers' views of the placement process, the project team explored the motivation for employers getting involved in the placement process. Employer views were sought on the attributes demonstrated by students during placement, the benefits to the students of the placement process, the issues or concerns they have about the process, and their recommendations for improvements to the process. The views from employers were compiled from responses to a survey, from short interviews at networking events and from online surveys.

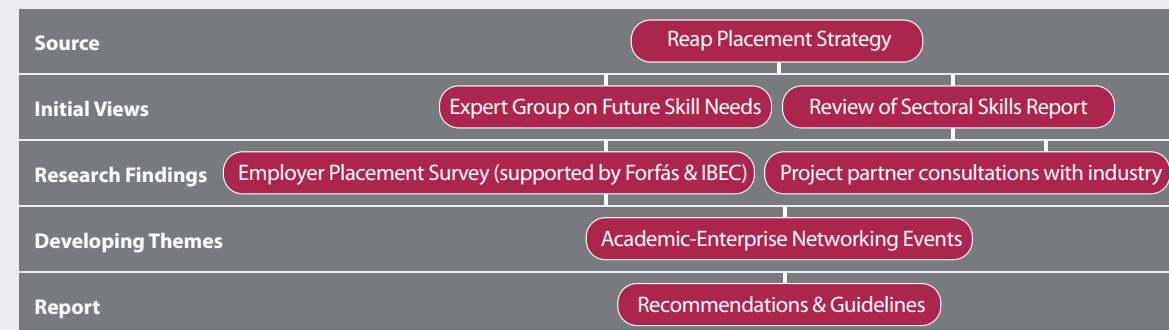


Figure. 3 Overview of employers' views

In summary the motivation for employers to be involved in placement included:

- A useful recruitment tool;
- Corporate responsibility;
- New skills and energy from students;
- Developing research links with the HEI.

Employers viewed the following as the most useful qualities displayed by students on placement:

- Ability to work as part of a team;
- Willingness to learn;
- Technical competence in the appropriate area.

From the employer perspective the main benefits that the students gained from the experience include:

- An opportunity to put their learning into practice;
- A chance to develop interpersonal skills;
- Enhancing CV and employability.

Employers' recommendations for improvement:

- Substantial duration of the placement;
- Communication between all parties;
- Preparation for placement;
- Clarity of expectations of all parties.

Benefits of Placement

The employers supported the view that placement offers a valuable learning opportunity in an undergraduate programme and they were very aware of the role that they played in facilitating that learning. An input to the project from the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs reported that, while employers are generally satisfied with the technical competences demonstrated by graduates, communication skills, commercial awareness, the ability to solve problems, and to apply theory to practice required improvement. In a submission by the Forum of Enterprise Employers to the National Strategy for Higher Education, employers spoke of the need for 'substantial work placements' to help address a perceived deficit in the practical application of theoretical knowledge. It is clear from the employers' responses to the current research that placements have the potential to make a significant contribution to the development of these skills:

During placement, students develop a maturing that they don't otherwise get from a straight academic degree course.

In Social Care, practice is so vital.

Placement should be mandatory in all third-level courses.

Students really benefit from hands-on experience.

Placements are a great confidence builder for student concerned.


Placements have been a very positive experience for all.

Two employers reported their main motivators:

The ability to add to the body of knowledge that student graduates with.

Good for us to bring in new ideas.

Employers also suggested that there should be an increased emphasis on behavioural competency gained through work, including verbal communication, initiative, and professionalism.



Most employers pointed to the benefits of placement as a recruitment tool. Some employers suggested they would consider recruiting only from higher education providers that offer placements:

I see it as growing future industry employees.

In previous years, we have been able to employ students who have been on placement and it is a good way to get to know them.

Many employers reported that they benefited from new skills and energy brought to the workplace by students but they cautioned that this benefit accrues only where the placement is of sufficient duration. Several employers believed that a placement provides a very useful level of engagement that allows the development of short research projects

It was suggested that employers might consider greater rotation of students on placement within their organisations to present more diverse opportunities for learning. Due to the effort involved in training and development, however, it was also suggested that students should spend more time in the employment situation for all parties to benefit.

Duration of the Placement

Employers expressed the view that placements should be longer – more than six months – for all parties to significantly benefit. The issue of balancing the benefit for the student and the employer was raised. In the case of a particularly short placement of six weeks employers stated that this does not create value for their organisation. It was suggested that if HEIs and disciplines vary placement timing, it would then avoid the situation where all courses and HEIs are competing for a particular timeframe. A further suggestion was to standardise the duration so that a clearer common understanding of a placement could be achieved:

We are always impressed with the quality of the students. Please consider extending the duration.

Placements need to be six months plus, for both student and employer to benefit. It is a huge commitment for the employer in training etc.

We need students who can commit over a period of time.

While the time and effort required by employers when organising placements reduced their attractiveness for many companies, the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs believed this challenge would be lessened by extending the duration of placements.

Some employers avail of added value from placements by offering extra part-time work or summer work to students on placement, allowing the employers to recoup more of their investment in the training and development of students.

Clarity of Expectations, for all Parties

The majority of employers suggested that greater clarity of expectations for all parties and enhanced preparation of the students were desirable:

Managing and clarifying expectations before placement is crucial to success.

We would welcome more collaboration where feasible and more training of supervisors.

Moving to a working environment can be stressful for the student. While employers can help with their integration, through induction, I do feel that education providers could assist them better with preparatory workshops before they leave the education institute.

I would recommend making sure that all students are well prepared and that placement is planned in the appropriate year of the course.

Many of the employers pointed to the need for more engagement with the higher education provider before, during, and after the placement.

The company should have greater involvement with the institute staff.

I was unsure about the details of the course that the students were on. It would be great to have a presentation about the course in advance of the placement.

It is important to develop a collaborative approach between organisations and higher education providers to build on and to provide students with relevant and meaningful work experiences that are aligned with their career goals and the organisation's requirements.

In some cases, the employer is provided with details of the preparation process that the student has undergone, with a clear statement of the learning outcomes of the placement, and with details of the reporting and assessment required. This ensures that the employer is fully informed and in a better position to contribute to the overall learning experience.

Communication between all Parties

In order to improve the overall placement experience, employers reported that they and the students need a clear point of contact in the academic institution along with improved reporting mechanisms. Other employers suggested that it would be useful for them to receive copies of the students' reports and feedback, to build a better informed picture of the learning and assessment.

Developing a contract or agreement is helpful. Regular communication between the college representative and a mentor in the business is also important to oversee and support the student.

Active contact between providers and employers is required.

Active interaction between the employer and the HEI at the beginning of the academic year is needed.

It is increasingly difficult to get supervision for placement students, so it would be a good idea to discuss how we can resolve issues of supervision, shared costs, training etc.

Our placements are going well with our local third-level college, but, maybe we should have more communication from tripartite meetings, if possible.

We would welcome a chance to give a guest lecture on our organisation.

Summary

Employers and employer representatives are clearly aware of the value of placement in the academic curriculum. A summary of the benefits they recognise and the concerns raised are presented in the following graphic:

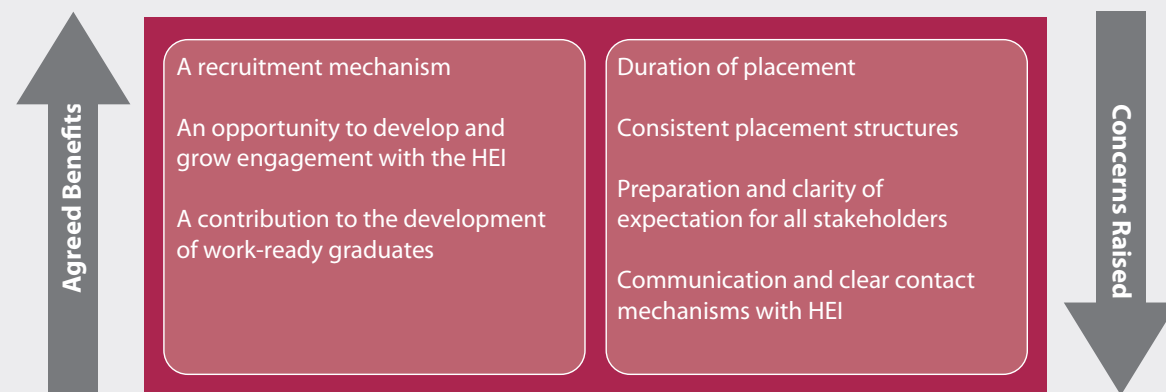


Figure 4: Summary of employers' views on work placement

2.3 Students' Views on Work Placement

Student Participants in the Research

Working group members conducted nine focus group interviews in their respective colleges with students who had returned from placement. In total, seventy-three students participated in the focus groups.

Students from eight of the focus groups were in their fourth year of study, and students from the ninth focus group were in their third year. Their disciplines ranged across Social Care, Business Information Systems, Software Development and Computer Networking, Analytical Chemistry, Computer Science, Government, Management, and Civil, Biomedical, Electronic and Mechanical Engineering. The duration of the work placements varied in length from three to six months. The majority of students were paid while on placement.

Research was also conducted in the DIT with 117 students in order to explore their perceptions of the Irish tourism industry, based on their placement experience (Kennedy Burke *et al.*, 2010).

Focus Group Interview Guide

Members of the working group developed a focus group interview guide to systematically gather wide-ranging information, from a broad range of students, on different aspects of work placements. The focus group interview guide included topics which the focus group facilitator was free to explore, to probe deeper, and to ask broader questions in relation to the topic under investigation. The most fundamental use of the focus group interview guide was to provide a basic checklist during the interviews, so that different groups and facilitators might address all relevant aspects of the placement. The guide also helped the focus group facilitators to carefully decide on how best to use the limited time available in the interview situation, as well as making the interviewing of different people more systematic and comprehensive.

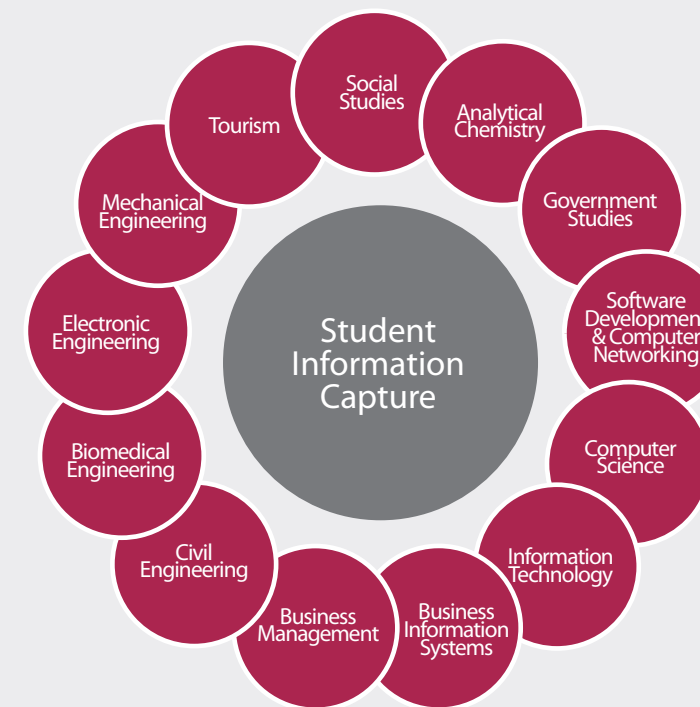


Figure 5: Disciplines included in the student focus groups and research

Student issues which emerged from the nine focus groups can be summarised as follows:

- Benefits of placement
 - Placement provision influenced choice of college course;
 - Likely to have greater relevance than a college-based research project;
 - Good fit with third-level course;
 - Good preparation for future career;
 - Networking opportunities.
- Difficulties associated with placement
 - Accommodation;
 - Transport;
 - Payment;
 - Support from HEI.
- Suggestions for improvement
 - Preparation for placement;
 - More contact with academic supervisor;
 - Assessment of placement.

General Impressions of Work Placement

At the opening stage of the focus groups all students were invited to give a brief overview of their broad impressions of their work placements. This question elicited a general sense of their overall experiences as students on placement. The majority of students gave very positive impressions of work placements:

Placement was one of the things that attracted me to the course. There were other similar courses in college that dealt with the general subject area but the fact that placement was offered with this course was something that actually won me over to it. I think it's something that definitely every course should have as it gives you a realistic expectation of what to expect when you leave college. It gives you good contacts as well.

There's no way research or a project could substitute for the placement experience. No way – not even near it.

I don't think there should be any course without placement; it's a great opportunity for students.

It was unbelievable, I loved it!

Educationalists should note that some students chose courses because they offer placement opportunities. Students perceived that opting for a placement can be more beneficial to them both in their college course and in future careers. They believed that the 'real world' experiences they gained while on placement could be used to apply theoretical aspects of their course in their future examinations. They further believed that the experience they built up in the workplace should make the transition from college to work easier for them. Students also suggested that having job experience on their CVs would be looked on more favourably by future employers in comparison to having completed only a college-based project. The students believed in the importance of building up personal contacts and that word-of-mouth contacts through networking would be very useful when applying for jobs:

You have more networking opportunities, as well as meeting people and getting to know them, so that down the line when you're looking for a job you've people to go back to and send them your CV.

The majority of students welcomed the opportunity for additional responsibilities while in the workplace, and in some instances students approached their supervisors and asked for further responsibilities:

I wasn't expecting to be given so much responsibility and there was a lot of pressure involved. I thought I'd go in and be given paper work and filing but I was actually given a proper job. You don't expect to be treated as a worker; you expect to be treated as a student and not given responsibility.

You learn a lot more about the industry especially if you're working in a bigger company. You also learn about the day-to-day operations and how to work on a team.

It was a really worthwhile experience because you got to use the skills you learned on the course and you got to apply those on placement. That was really rewarding, it was great.

The whole experience matched my expectations for placement.

As illustrated from the representative quotations above, the majority of students believed that work placements are "really beneficial", and suggested that "there's no way research or a project could substitute for the placement

experience". Many students emphasised the importance of gaining practical experience and cited instances of people in the workplace who suggested that "placement really marks out a difference on your CV".

From the seventy-three students who participated in the focus groups, only four students had negative perceptions of their placements, as illustrated by the following quotations:

I didn't really find it very challenging.

I didn't find it interesting at all.

While I enjoyed the fact that my placement wasn't really related to my course, I felt that I was somewhat missing out on the experience of practising things relevant to my course. I was doing something that I didn't need a degree to do. They have hired people straight from Leaving Cert to do the job I was doing. So, I felt my position was slightly wasted, but, I still got experience of teamwork and projects.

It was just general everyday administration work. You wouldn't need a degree to do my job, so it wasn't really course related.

The above comments might suggest that the main dissatisfaction stemmed from students not being challenged enough during their placements.

Students were asked to specify what they liked about their placements. There was a large consensus among students on the positive aspects of placements:

Placement is great for your CV.

You were able to see what we've learned and how to apply that to the real world.

There was a relaxed atmosphere, easy going, and it was a break from college.

A lot of us did research as part of our work placement, but it was a more interesting application of research rather than just writing up a paper. We had a lot of the skills developed, and it allowed us to increase our research skills.

It was also handy to earn a bit of money.

To be able to get out there, it's a good feeling, even if one is unsure of oneself.

Having to go to meetings was good experience. I think getting the opportunity to do that as a student on placement rather than going into your first job and having to understand what is going on at a meeting is good. It is just something that takes the fear out of it if you have already experienced it.

You can get contacts and ideas from the company for your fourth year project.

It gave us a bit of independence when we were in placements outside of our own area. We had to sort out accommodation and travel and things like that.

I also learned different skills that we weren't taught in college.

The main thing was that you got an insight into what it was like to work in the industry. We work on projects in college every week, but it was nice to see how these things work in industry.

As illustrated in the above quotations, students believe that their work placements provided many advantages, both for immediate benefits to them in their college courses and for long-term benefits for future careers. A large number of students related apprehensions about starting in the workplace and being “unsure of oneself”, but as the placement progressed they grew in confidence. They also recognised that it was important to be taken out of their comfort zone and suggested that the mainstream three or four years in college would not have provided the same level of confidence building.

Students were then asked to illustrate aspects of their placements which they disliked. For the majority of the students the issues raised centred on logistics — such as travel, finding accommodation, or adjusting to foreign cultures — rather than on the work experience itself:

Not a lot of people realise that if you're going abroad on placement, and especially if you're going on your own, it isn't easy. I went over to Brussels and in a way I found I was cast adrift. There are a lot of practical things like different customs, culture, housing, finances, the law, policing. I think there should be a bit more forewarning of what to expect, a bit more looking at practical living in a foreign country. These would be the only negative things I had. Conversely, on the positive side, I don't think any of us really found anything negative with the actual placement itself. We all came out with a positive view.

Placement is brilliant but for most people who went to Edinburgh looking for accommodation was just a disaster, it was so hard to find. They wanted to tie us into a six-month contract, if not, they wanted to tie us into a four-month contract, and they wanted all the money up front and that was £2,000 each. So, it was really, really difficult.

Just something really small, the council tax in Scotland is £1,300 for the year and you have to pay that as soon as you get an apartment. When we emailed the college looking for a letter giving proof that we were students to exempt us from that tax it took weeks to get that letter.

The lack of help with accommodation made things really difficult for us.

For students going abroad there should be more emphasis on giving help when they arrive. Students arrive at a foreign airport and there is nobody there to meet them. There should be somebody from the company to meet you.

I tried to open a bank account and I needed a letter from college to prove I was on placement because I had such a short-term lease. It took ages to get it. I think I was without a bank account for more than half my placement and it was awful.

I had to move away from my home town, I didn't mind moving, but the town I moved to was a bit dead in comparison to my home town.

I went to placement in Dublin and I think it would have been good to have found out how much we were getting paid closer to the time before we started our placement. How much you get paid affects what

kind of accommodation you can get. So, I would have liked to have found out the payment. I knew we were getting paid but I didn't know how much. It would have made life a lot easier to have had this information sooner.

The quotations illustrate that there is scope for improvement from the higher education providers and employers in relation to providing assistance with accommodation and providing information on payments being on offer. In particular, students who moved abroad for placements emphasised the need for further assistance from third-level providers in easing their transition.

Overall, it is clear that students perceived their work placements to be very advantageous for developing new skills, for networking, confidence building, and gaining industry experience. They also suggested that their work experience was a “very good fit” with their college courses. Work placements also provided the students with opportunities for informal and experiential learning. Students highlighted many benefits from integrating this type of learning with the formal theoretical class-based learning which they brought to their workplaces from third-level courses. Many students confirmed the importance of their overall personal development along with their professional development.

Preparation for Work Placement

Students were asked to share their views on what support they received to prepare them for their work placements. While students from all colleges received guidance on CV preparation, many students were critical of the manner in which this aspect of support was managed:


The CVs all had to be done in the same format. I thought that wasn't great. The college had this solid format that you couldn't change around. The CVs went out to the companies, all looking the same. I thought if we were allowed to personalise them a bit more ourselves it would be better.

The careers people helped us by looking over our CVs. There was some mock interview preparation but not enough. There should be more of a lead-in preparation time.

We had a class once a week on CV writing, professional etiquette, etc. One or two things were helpful. We had a one-to-one CV clinic which was really useful.

I found the classes we got before we went on placement pointless because I know for a fact I didn't take anything from those classes and directly apply it to my work placement

In terms of the weaknesses in the preparation aspect of placement, lack of communication was a huge thing.



From these representative responses it is clear that students would benefit from greater preparatory support for their placements. They suggested that they would have been more “work ready” if they received guidance from the careers services of their institutions. The majority of students suggested that the “only” help they received was in CV preparation. As many students articulated a lack of adequate preparation for placements, focus group participants were then prompted to suggest how preparation might be improved:

I feel that we needed more preparation for presentations because in my job I had to do a lot of presentations on my own. In future, I think they should incorporate presentations more into the degree.

We should act as ambassadors for the next lot of students to help put them more at ease before they go on placement.

There should be much more help given for finding accommodation.

I would have liked a mock interview.

We had teamwork training for one class, but we probably could have done with more of that.

I think we should have had another module for more practical industry-related training.

There should be a day at the start of the year where they explain the expenses to you and give you a decent idea of what it should cost.

Schedules should be provided for visits and report deadlines. Towards the end of the placement we were supposed to hand in reports, monthly reports and a final report. None of us knew when the deadline was or what type of report was needed or who to hand it up to. So, we got confused. Thankfully, our lecturer solved it in the end after we called him and told him we did not know what was going on. In that sense it would have been better if the college was a bit more attentive. It felt like they had forgotten about us.

Contact details could be provided for the college placement supervisor or a support service number. We weren't provided with any details.

Many students spoke of the increased workload placed on third-level institution staff members when organising placements, and cited instances of placements being sourced on an *ad hoc* basis depending on the contacts that individual lecturers had built up over the years. Students suggested that, ideally, there should be a designated third-level staff member who would plan, organise, and monitor student placements. Students also believed they would benefit from better preparation based on developing softer skills, in particular, interpersonal communications in the work place. Students cited examples of being unsure of how to communicate with their immediate supervisors and senior management and they believed they would have been more “confident and work ready” if they had been better prepared before they entered the workplace. They further suggested that inviting human resource managers from employer organisations and inviting former work placement students to present workshops on what they might expect would be valuable learning for them.

Placement Experience

Students were invited to share their insights based on their placement experiences, and to highlight their likes and dislikes of their time spent in the workplace. The findings from the focus groups indicated that the work experience for each individual student was quite varied, even for students within the same course:

The work we did was very varied; everyone was doing different things on their placement.

The majority of students suggested that their placements were very positive experiences, and in many cases exceeded their expectations:

Within the first day I was given access to most things and I was very surprised I got that. I thought they would give me nothing being a student.

I felt placement was going to be a big challenge, but, it was better than what I expected.

I was nervous going there thinking it could be a disaster and would I be able to do the work, but, I learned a lot from it.

It was a whole lot less daunting than I thought it was going to be. Everyone was very helpful and very friendly.

As there were only two people in my office, my boss said on the first day that he couldn't afford to have me doing menial stuff. They were so underfunded they had to get stuff done. I was given three days training and then was told you're one of us now so you have to get everything done. It was brilliant. I wouldn't change anything about it.

You'll have your good and bad days in the place where you work. There will always be an aspect of the job that you will be unhappy with, even if it is the ideal job. Finding what you don't like is just as important as finding what you like.

The above quotations illustrate how students welcomed the additional responsibilities they were given and many of them indicated that they were “surprised to be treated like an employee rather than a student”. Many of the focus group participants entered the workplace with rather low expectations of their tasks and perceived that they may be given “made-up jobs” or even feel they might be “in the way”. The majority of students, instead, reported that they were “surprised” at how seriously they were taken in the workplace, and began to fit in and feel part of the team almost immediately. The majority of students also reported very positive interactions with their workplace supervisors, and found their supervisors to be “approachable”, “supportive” and they appreciated their “friendliness and honesty”.

Students were then asked to highlight specific aspects of their placements which appealed to them:

I found it to be a good experience in communications. My boss was very good at listening; he listened to everyone's opinion. If there was a disagreement with people, they would always get together and sort it out.

Constantly working with my supervisor was very nice. We had weekly meetings and constant contact.

I liked learning new skills, like people skills.

I learned about dealing with grumpy customers. Sometimes when customers freaked out on the phone for no apparent reason, my boss taught me how to deal with them, one-by-one, and to be patient and not to worry. So, my listening skills were built up.

It gives you confidence. My first week involved phoning people and finding out where they worked to fix their problem and I was feeling really embarrassed wondering what I'd say and then after a few weeks you know automatically how to speak with people on the phone. It really helped my communication skills.

It's to do with the environment as well and how you interact with each other. In college you're not going to learn anything about how to interact with your boss or how the boss interacts with his subordinates.

I wouldn't like to be sitting at a desk all day. It gave me an insight into what I'd like to do. I know what I want; I couldn't sit at a desk 24/7. I'd have to be able to get up and walk around.

Sometimes I had to go and give a presentation to new people coming in. I would never have done that before. For me being able to talk in front of a big group, or when I look at the new trainee coming in I feel well I was you at that stage, I feel I'm after coming a long way because of my placement.

The above quotations underscore the importance of communication skills which allowed the students to become more confident in their roles. Students also emphasised the importance of their relationships with supervisors, and the majority of students welcomed the opportunity to work in teams. The students also suggested that placement gave them an opportunity to evaluate their skill levels and abilities and, importantly for them, to recognise in time that they may not be interested in working in the same employment over the long term.

Students were then invited to share the aspects of placement which they particularly disliked:

Applying for placement was very stressful. One company might come in and the whole class, out of panic, would apply for it.

I didn't like their attitudes at the beginning, saying "She's only a student; she doesn't really know what's going on". I didn't like them questioning my abilities and being referred to as "the student". I do have a name. In my own team, however, they treated me just as an equal.

A small minority of students believed that they were not asked to do "proper" tasks and suggested that companies were "inventing" chores for them:

They should have a schedule prepared for me where they had things that they knew they wanted me for. There wasn't a schedule. It was just like daily chores and we'll think of something. They were thinking of stuff to give me. I thought they were inventing things for me to do.

They always had me in mind for the worst jobs, but, they told me that from the start.

When your manager doesn't get back to you when you have finished the job you do feel you're doing the job just for the sake of it.

Some students had strong opinions on assessment methods used for evaluating their placements, and suggested that the assessment aspect "needs to be overhauled". Students were also critical of keeping workplace diaries and "having to write an essay" on their overall experiences:

You can be king intern in the office, but if you don't hand in that stupid essay you can fail placement, which is ridiculous. Surely between you, and your supervisor, and the academic staff you should be able to come together at the end and say was this a success or a failure? You shouldn't have to write a bible about it. It's work for work's sake.

I think the assessment process needs to be a lot more practical rather than about your feelings.

There was a lack of flexibility. At the end of placement we had to do all our paperwork instead of enjoying the culture and country we were in. It could be our only time in America, our only time to travel around.

There is far too much paperwork involved in the assessment of the placement.

Many students were critical of the overall assessment of work placement, especially as the placement was usually graded on a pass or fail basis:

I'd like more indication than just a pass or fail grade, as you want to know if you did better. Even an A, B, or C grading.

There's no way you can improve if you just get a pass or fail grade. We got feedback but none of us really knows exactly how we did.

Basically, if you filled in your learning log and you got it signed and if everything was adequate then that was a pass grade.

The above quotations illustrate that there are opportunities for HEIs to re-evaluate the assessment of placements. Students were quite vocal in their opposition to completing diaries, and very many students reported they did not think there was any merit in keeping such diaries. They believed the majority of students did not keep a weekly diary, but just "filled it all in at the end", and they questioned the learning to be gained from this type of exercise.

Students highlighted financial costs as a weakness in the placements system, especially for students who are not on paid placements:

It is a big financial burden because you can't get a part-time job because of it. I had to turn down a really well paid summer job.

Some of our classmates who were in Boston had to get weekend jobs caddying to try to fund their placements. They were living very much from day to day.

I got help from home but the expenses were a big load for me and my family.

There was a total neglect of the financial aspect of placement – the attitude was: you'll just have to get a loan.

I'd think I'd cry if I added up the amount of money I spent on petrol going to work last summer. Unfortunately, I was getting paid less than the minimum wage so that was a bit annoying. Also, it took more than a month to get our first pay cheque, so that made things a bit more difficult.

As mentioned earlier, the majority of students had paid placements, but the rates of pay varied significantly. Some students believed they were unprepared for additional financial expenses such as moving out of home, travel expenses, and, in particular, moving abroad. Students recommended that the financial aspect should be highlighted in the early stages of preparing for placements.

All students in three of the focus groups disliked the lack of contact with their college during their six-month placement:

No college supervisor visited us while on work experience.

My college supervisor called on the Friday after I left. It would be more professional if the visit happened while we were there, otherwise it feels the college just left you.

I was talking to my manager and he said, "It's a bit weird that you haven't heard anything".

When we did get to speak with our course co-ordinator, he asked, "Why are you panicking?" But, we had been in the dark for so long it felt like the college didn't care about us.

What academic supervisors? I never heard from mine. Does one phone call count?

Another group of students were also critical of the lack of support from their college:

There was a delay in communications with everything from the college; so you end up on your last week panicking when you are supposed to do to other stuff. It was nerve-wrecking to be honest.

The above quotations indicate that students expect third-level placement providers to proactively communicate with them during placements. A number of students suggested that employers might perceive third-level colleges as somewhat "unprofessional" because of the lack of contact throughout the placement period.

Overall, the majority of students were pleased with their work experiences. In general, they believed that the experience they gained was appropriate and had an appropriate fit with their respective courses. They also recognised the benefits of the placements for their future careers.

Improving the Work Experience

Finally, students were asked for their suggestions on improving work experience — from the student, employer, and academic supervisor perspective. Many students suggested that it would be beneficial if they had access to previous students who had work placements in the organisations they were proposing to apply to:

Some past students' experiences would be appropriate to most of us as we didn't know the potential scope of a particular role, and how an individual's experience can be relevant across a number of roles.

It would have been useful to have those with experience in various roles to come to our class and describe them for 15 minutes and give examples of the work they were doing. I am willing to go and talk to those who would be going on placement next year to brief them.

We should also have been given a dress code.

I was terrified the first week. I came in wearing really formal clothes; I didn't know what to wear. They said to me that I could wear a hoodie the next day if I want and I was embarrassed. It would be great to be informed of the dress code.

I think it is good to show up in the first week dressed formally, but I was crawling in under desks plugging in things with heating on and I was under someone's desk in a shirt and tie.

I would have liked more information from past students.

Focus group participants volunteered to make themselves available to talk to current students on what to expect on placement. They added that this activity would be free of charge and easy to implement from the HEIs perspective.

Students also suggested that the assessment methods and allocation of credits for work placement should be improved:

It should definitely be worth a lot more than ten credits, considering the fact we spend at least 14 weeks there. It's stressful enough; some of us have to plan accommodation, find money, and stuff like that — and getting only ten credits seems like a slap in the face. We spend so much time on placement and then get only one-sixth of our year's marks for it.

I think keeping a diary was pointless. It should be scrapped completely. How can you be judged by what you do every day? I propose a monthly rather than a weekly diary. Students make up that diary which makes it stupid. It is very childish. I think it was worth 40% of the final mark.

The general academic workload associated with it is huge and they expect it all at the end. If the review process could have been constant, for example, if you did a monthly or bimonthly report and you're given those deadlines in advance that would be better. I can say from personal experience that I left everything to the end and that is the beginning of fourth year so it all just crashes together.

When we finished our placements we spent two weeks writing essays. We all left it to the last minute — we're students — but I know whoever receives those 25,000 words is not going to read them; no

one wants to know how many pages I photocopied. There has to be a radical overhaul of that — even just one interview at the end, with a 1,000-word summary.

For us we felt the employer should have a more significant role in the assessment of the placement. The whole placement idea is all about a practical application of your skills and that's what should be graded.

While students generally were very positive about their experiences in their work places, they believed that the workplace experience for future students could be greatly enhanced through quite minor adjustments to supervision which would not entail additional costs.

Students also recommended improving the placement experience from the employer perspective:

The employer could have written guidelines on what to do for both the supervisor and myself. A copy of this could be transferred from year to year.

Employers could have been given an information pack. This would include the aims of placement and what the student is supposed to achieve on placement. The CEO asked me what I wanted to do on placement and what I wanted to get out of the placement. Students sometimes don't know what they want and don't know what to expect. There is a need for a placement pack for each organisation.

I went to the company with no job specification for the job I got. Where it said 'job specification', it said one would be available in a month after the job was advertised, but even after three months there was still no specification and no real links from their website. Going into a job and not knowing the specific part of what you're going into and what you might be asked to do leaves you with a blank face. So, in future it would be good to have a job specification with links to the company so students can do their own background research before they get there.

Many students were quite vocal when recommending improvements to the placement experience from the academic supervisor perspective:

The supervisor visited the organisation but did not meet the student. It would have been useful if the supervisor had a meeting with the workplace supervisor and the student.

When the academic supervisor came to the workplace he spoke more about football than about the work experience.

I wasn't talking much to our college supervisor when he came to meet me. He spent only about ten minutes in the meeting room with my supervisor, and my supervisor had told me beforehand, "You are doing grand", so it was kind of pointless.

The college should set up an alliance with companies whereby you are guaranteed placements. We weren't guaranteed anything.

There should be a broader range of options for places to go on placement. We should not be limited to Ireland; the college should aim for international placements.

The college should appoint and notify students of a point of contact or a main contact person while on placement.

There should be better communication between the college and the company. The company was not aware of what was going on. Because of a lack of communication it made the college look unprofessional.

Guidance should be provided on the completion of the final report, for example, how much or how little detail is needed. The appropriate length of the report and details of the confidentiality agreement should be made known to students who are restricted when providing data.

Summary

In general students found the placement to be a very positive experience. The benefits they identified and the main concerns raised are summarised in the following graphic:

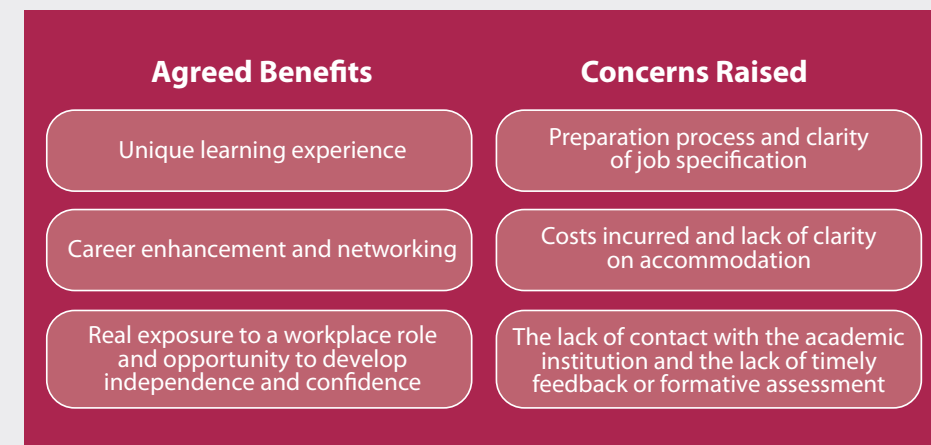


Figure 6: Summary of students' views on work placement

2.4 Issues Emerging from the Research

On issues relating to the placement experience, responses from the HEIs employers, and students showed many similarities. First, all stakeholders agree that placements which are of longer duration are more beneficial to both the employer and the student. Second, the generic skills which employers identified as valuable to their organisations coincided with the requirements of students for enhancing their future employability. Third, all respondents endorsed the importance of open three-way communication, and the importance of clarity of expectations for all parties. Fourth, employer and student participants believed that more in-depth placement preparation and more contact from the HEI during the placement would be beneficial. Fifth, employers and students agreed that placements offer many opportunities for putting classroom learning into practice, and afford many opportunities for informal learning in the workplace.

While it was clear that students, educators, and employers all valued the contribution of work placement within the learning curriculum at third-level, there was widespread agreement, however, that placement does not always attain its full potential for a variety of reasons. In examining the themes, which have emerged from the empirical research conducted for this report, a number of difficulties in the provision of successful work placements emerged.

The main concerns were identified as:

- Growing demand for placement despite a lack of placement availability;
- Lack of clear academic value for placement, including a lack of confidence in the learning and assessment methodologies;
- Academic programme design and timetabling can limit the duration of placement;
- Commitment, resources, and clear communications channels on all sides of the partnership are required;
- Too few placements have written agreements — agreements that should help clarify expectations and roles in the process — and in many cases there is insufficient or inconsistent preparation for placement;
- Growing numbers of unpaid placements cause difficulties for students where the placement often represents a cost in terms of travel and accommodation, along with the loss of potential part-time work earnings;
- Opportunities for institutional learning are lost where approaches to placement are uncoordinated or where contacts are confined to individuals without the benefits of broader networking or where a wider institutional approach and defined operational framework are absent;
- Lack of incentives for employers to engage with HEIs, especially in recession.

Some of these are explored in greater detail below.

Demand for Work Experience

The most pervasive barrier is also the simplest to identify and understand: there are not enough work experience placements available to meet the growing demand from students. This has a number of effects. For employers, it means increased resource cost to respond to the large number of requests received. For education institutions, it means that finding work experience for students can often be time-consuming, difficult, and not always successful.

Programme Design

A number of issues arise when designing placement into an academic programme. The time allocated to placement is often seen as displacing other traditional learning opportunities in the curriculum. Most placements occur in the third year of a four-year programme and the duration is generally limited by the semesterised system which sees a 12 to 14 week block as the most convenient timeframe.

While it is widely accepted that the placement experience offers a valuable learning opportunity, this is often not reflected in the credit allocated to placement within the course design. While all of the programmes which were considered in-depth for this report had clearly defined learning outcomes for the placement, the variation in academic credit applied to placement learning was striking. On some courses, a 14-week placement attracted 10 credits, in other cases 30 credits. Shorter placements of 6-8 weeks varied between 4 and 10 credits depending on the programme. These variations were evident within institutions as well as across different institutions. In many cases, the assessment process does not offer grades for the placement learning. This often reflects concerns about the authenticity and validity of the assessment methodologies and lack of confidence in the placement as well as concern about variability in the quality of the experience.

Resources and Organisation

Organising successful work placements requires considerable resources from both the HEIs and employers. It needs time, money, expertise and commitment, and not all organisations have access to all of these requirements. This could act as a particular barrier to small and medium-sized enterprises which comprise a significant number of employers in many locations. Some employers may perceive the time and costs associated with providing work placements as potential barriers. The amount of time that is necessary to supervise a student, to set up and monitor projects or the work that students undertake may be considered too resource intensive. Additionally, the time and effort it takes to make links with HEIs and subsequently with potential students may also act as barriers, particularly for smaller employers.

In the HEI, considerable resources are required to plan, negotiate, organise, and monitor work placements for students. HEIs operate diverse arrangements for placement, with varying durations, work expectations, academic credits, learning outcomes, contacts, and assessment methodologies. This lack of coordination creates difficulties in the workplace, and a loss of organisational learning and networking opportunity from the perspective HEI also. The difficulties in applying academic and administrative resources to the placement process have been exacerbated by growing full-time student numbers and reducing staff numbers in most HEIs.

Unpaid Placements

Consultations with HEI staff confirm wide variation in payment expectations across the different educational disciplines. In some areas, such as social care, the placement has generally been unpaid. In other disciplines, such as computing and engineering, the placement has usually been paid. In more recent times many employers across all disciplines are offering unpaid placements. While an unpaid work placement is in line with the concept that the placement is predominantly a learning activity, this results in additional difficulties for students. Students report that unpaid placements represent a significant financial burden. Often the student has additional accommodation and transport costs during the placement period and, recognising that many students fund their learning through part-time work and holiday work, the work placement can also deny them significant opportunities for earning money. Some HEIs have reported situations where this has been addressed by limiting the unpaid placement commitment by the student to a total of 24 hours per week.

Placement as Part of Partnership Development

A recent IBEC report (2010) indicated that employers expect HEIs to build employability criteria into their various curricula. The report also stated that 38% of their respondents to an employer survey now have informal or *ad hoc* college placement procedures. Generally, these interactions for placements are not systematically structured as part of the broader partnership continuum. All of the HEI project partners in the REAP project agreed that placement is an ideal opportunity for entry-level partnership. Structures need to be developed, however, to coordinate the relationship management and to identify opportunities for interactions across disciplinary or

3 Conclusions

academic unit boundaries. It is also important to provide the employer with a clearer and more coherent picture of the opportunities presented by the HEI as a learning and research partner. This is particularly important for the smaller employers who find it more difficult to engage and for whom the costs can often seem to outweigh the benefits.

Finally, HEIs, employers, and students all agree that the many benefits provided by placements are a win-win situation for all. The REAP project confirms that placement provision is often the first stage of external engagement between third-level institutions and employers. The REAP project envisages that this initial engagement through placement activity will encourage third-level institutions and employers to become strategic partners, as identified in the partnership continuum in Section 1.



Third-level education plays a significant role in fostering the transfer of employability skills to students. Increasingly, this is achieved through developing a tripartite link between students, employers, and HEIs providers. Graduates are now expected to be able to perform efficiently on the job almost as soon as they take up employment, utilising the many skills gained while in third-level education. A recent IBEC Education and Skills Survey (2010) notes that employers now expect HEIs to embed generic or employability skills more fully into their curricula. The same survey indicates that, while employers generally have little difficulty recruiting suitable graduates, they are not always satisfied with the ability of graduates to work autonomously. As graduates are now looking for jobs at a time of higher unemployment and reduced graduate recruitment, graduates need to work harder to convince prospective employers that they can be readily productive in the workforce.

Work placement is now a key element in third-level education, helping students to prepare more successfully for employment and it improves the currency and relevance of third-level education curricula. For employers, work placement provides an ideal resource for optimum selection and recruitment of employees.

A number of recent sectoral reports published by Forfás, such as *Future Skills Needs of Enterprise within the Green Economy in Ireland* (2010), *Future Skills Requirements of the Biopharma-Pharmachem Sector* (2010), *Future Skills Needs of the Wholesale and Retail Sector* (2010), and *Future Skills Requirements of the Food and Beverage Sector* (2009) all suggest that well-structured placement programmes enhance graduate employability and benefit both the student and the employer.

The REAP project research emphasises that, in addition to work placement providing a valuable learning opportunity, placement should be recognised as part of a wider partnership engagement between HEIs and employers. The REAP project underscores the importance of the tripartite nature of the work placement partnership, involving the student, the third-level institution, and the employer. The facilitation of an open three-way communication in the design, organisation, and monitoring of the activity is required in order to ensure successful completion of a work placement.

Placement is an important component of third-level programmes and is one of the most vital experiences on which graduates base their career aspirations. There is an onus, therefore, on HEIs and employers to ensure that the placement experience is as rewarding as possible for students. Placement provides opportunities for HEIs and employers to work together to produce graduates with appropriate knowledge, skills, and competence to meet existing and emerging business needs. It is important to encourage employing organisations of all sizes and from all sectors to become involved in the employability agenda, not least because this should provide them with a better graduate recruitment pool.

Work placements also provide opportunities for students to develop soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, and multi-tasking skills, which are essential in learning and work situations as well as part of general life skills for employees. Employers tend to have more positive views of graduates who have undertaken work placements during their undergraduate course. These graduates are generally perceived to have acquired more employability skills for success at work. Building and sustaining longer-term and closer relationships between HEIs and employers is, therefore, an integral part of successful placements. Developing and, more importantly, maintaining successful education–industry partnerships requires continuous engagement. The IBEC Survey on Education and Skills (2010) cautions, however, that where interactions do occur between employers and HEIs they tend to be in larger organisations employing more than 250 employees and rarely in SMEs.

Research by Nixon *et al.* (2006) suggests that over 70% of learning comes from experiences, either planned or unplanned, thus emphasising the need to learn from ‘real work’. The legitimacy of the workplace as a source of learning is increasingly recognised by HEIs. Developing higher level skills is no longer restricted to learning gained within the mainstream higher education environment. The demand for higher level skills in the knowledge economy should motivate educators and employers to work together to ensure graduates are ‘work ready’ for an upturn in the economy. Graduates will need to be multi-skilled for employers to compete in increasingly global contexts in order to meet challenges posed by rapidly-developing countries such as China and India.

For students, a course which provides work placement provides them with opportunities to gain insights into an industry or other type of work, and also allows them to observe how theory gained on their course translates to practice. Students supplement their learning with practical experience through informal and non-formal learning as well as building up generic transferrable skills. Thus, work placement plays an important role in helping students to ground their theoretical studies by aligning them with their work placement experience. Personal development is also an important element of the placement experience, as students articulated a sense of increased confidence in their communication, time management, and team-working skills. As classroom challenges are not subject to the same time urgency that is an integral part of work life, placements help to prepare students for this important career element. General experience gained in the workplace is difficult to replicate effectively outside the workplace, therefore, work placements add significantly to the value of third-level qualifications. Higher education courses that include work placements contribute in a considerable way to enhancing student skills, thus giving competitive advantage to the Irish workforce.

The research conducted by the REAP project team, presented in this report, highlights the value of placement from the perspective of all stakeholders. This report also raised some challenges relating to the design, organisation, and monitoring of placement learning experiences. Through consideration of the findings, the project team developed a set of guidelines for good practice. These guidelines, presented in Appendix A, provide a framework for good practice in work placement. The roles of the student, the employer, and the HEI are considered before, during, and after work placement. The guidelines are intended to be generalisable across all sectors and disciplines.

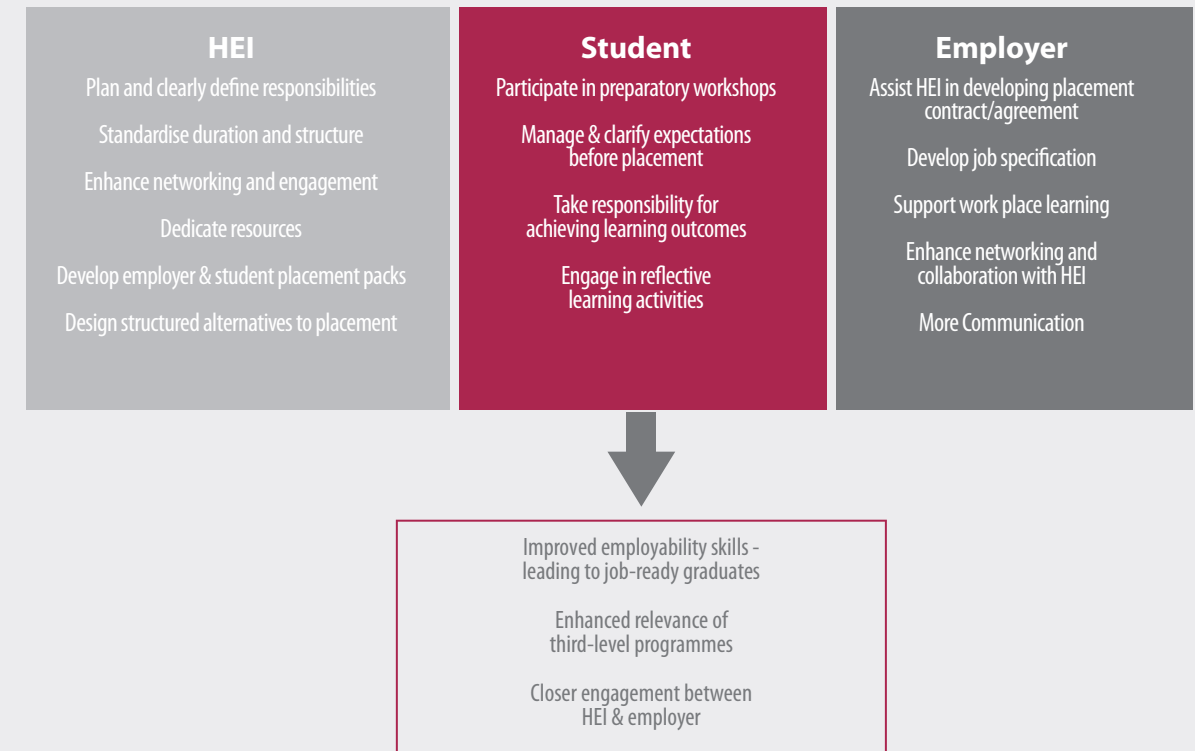


Figure 7: Stakeholders’ responsibilities for improving the placement process

To further spread the learning gathered from the many contributions to the REAP project, a reusable structure was devised to support the placement experience. This is made available through an outline Employer Placement Pack and a Student Placement Pack. All of the contributions from the various stakeholders pointed to the need for better preparation, clarity of expectations, improved communications, and three-way contact mechanisms. The placement packs should help to address these issues as they provide a customisable blueprint which HEIs can use to support placement. These are included as Appendix B and Appendix C.

Another effective tool to facilitate learning acquisition and evidencing through the placement process is described in Appendix D. Student Diary Pro was piloted through the REAP project as a mechanism to allow students on placement to reflect on their learning experiences and to interpret these experiences as a series of planned competences and to upload appropriate evidence.



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In conclusion, it is evident that the many benefits of student work placement, presented in this report, are far more significant than the difficulties which have been outlined. Work placements provide many opportunities for HEIs and employers to work more closely together to provide graduates with higher level and employability skills which are needed in the Irish economy. Students' choice in pursuing a particular course is influenced by the provision of work placement. The emphasis on the smart economy requires that third-level education will continually interact with and respond to the needs of industry, and in so doing will continue to be informed by workplace requirements in order to produce graduates who are optimally employment ready. Ensuring that graduates from third-level institutions successfully transfer into the workforce is central to Ireland regaining its competitive edge.



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Appendix A: Placement Practice Guide

The following guidelines were developed to enable HEIs, employers, and students to achieve good practice in planning, organising and managing learning in a workplace setting. The guidelines recognise that placement learning, in cooperation with enterprises and employers, can form a significant part of a student's learning experience. The motivation for the inclusion of placement in third-level programmes was strongly supported by all of the research undertaken.

The development of these guidelines has been informed by the views and experiences of employers, HEI staff and students. These guidelines are intended to form a framework to facilitate enhanced learning opportunities and improved collaboration and communication between all stakeholders in the placement process. Work placement is a three-way learning arrangement and it is important that all parties involved are aware of their responsibilities before, during and after the placement period.

The most significant themes emerging from the research centred on the need for:

- Careful preparation for the placement process for all three stakeholders;
- Clear communication channels between the three parties;
- Enhanced feedback processes to ensure continuous improvement;
- Optimisation of the engagement opportunities resulting from the placement experience.

These themes are addressed in the guidelines developed below. While the main responsibility for the planning and structuring of the placement process will rest with the HEI, the responsibilities of all three parties before during and after the placement are summarised. It is intended that these will act as a useful guide or checklist for all parties. These guidelines and recommendations formed the backdrop for the Placement Packs which were developed to further facilitate good practice.

1.0 Guidelines for Higher Education Institutions

1.1 Pre-placement

The learning outcomes of the work placement should be clearly stated and should integrate coherently with the overall programme. When developing the learning outcomes for the placement, assessment methodologies should be carefully considered. If the employer or workplace mentor is to have a role in the assessment, procedures should be in place to ensure that mentors are adequately informed and prepared. The HEI will need to decide if marks or grades will be awarded to the student in assessing the learning gained. The arrangements for internal and external examination, including the role of the external examiner(s) must be stipulated.

The number of credits and the level of study of the placement period should be consistent with the duration and learner effort involved. Serious consideration needs to be given to the learning status of the placement within the programme, whether mandatory or elective.

Alternatives to placement should be considered and planned for, as well as criteria for exemption from the placement learning experience for students who may have previously gained the learning outcomes.

The HEI, as the awarding body, retains ultimate responsibility for ensuring that the intended learning outcomes are appropriate in terms of academic standards and for ensuring that the work placement provides adequate opportunities for the learning outcomes.

Procedures for securing work placements and the criteria for the approval of placements, including consequences for students who fail to secure or to complete a suitable placement must be specified.

HEIs need to 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.

Health and safety issues and insurance arrangements should be considered when assessing suitable employment locations.

Where a student is required to or opts to find their own placement provider, they should be given appropriate guidance and the placement provider should be approved by the academic placement coordinator.

Arrangements should be put in place to deal with circumstances where the placement cannot be continued.

The responsible person in the HEI should ensure that all students are well prepared for the placement process, including providing:

- Clarity on the placement learning outcomes and how these relate to the aims and learning outcomes for the programme;
- Information on the required evidence of satisfactorily meeting learning outcomes;
- Assessment details and criteria;
- Details of how placement opportunities will be made available to students;
- Mechanisms for students to apply for specific placement opportunities;
- Guidance on preparation of CV and interview techniques;
- Clarity on special obligations which may apply in relation to legal, ethical, or confidentiality issues;
- Guidelines on general health and safety in the workplace;
- Guidelines on relevant insurance arrangements;
- Agreements for maintaining regular contact with students throughout the period of the placement and procedures for reporting any difficulties that may arise;
- Details of planned visits or other communication mechanisms;
- Necessary paperwork from the HEI stating that the student is on work placement appropriate for banking purposes and landlords.

The HEI should also ensure that the employer is suitably prepared for the placement by providing them with:

- Details of the learning outcomes and assessment methodologies applicable to the placement;
- Contact arrangements for the duration of the placement;
- An input to the development of suitable induction processes for the student;
- Guide and support for the workplace mentor who will have responsibility for the student for the duration of the placement.

1.2 During Placement

During placement the student remains a registered student of the HEI and it should provide adequate support for the student. Consideration should be given to the facilitation of regular reporting of and reflection on the learning gained in the context of the stated learning outcomes.

While it is usually intended that the student should develop autonomous learning skills in the course of the placement, arrangements are likely to include some formative assessment in order to ensure satisfactory progress.

The HEI should ensure that the student and the employer share a clear point of contact in the institution. Regular and planned communication between all parties should ensure that any difficulties are addressed and corrected in a timely manner.

Telephone calls, visits, and placement assessment activities should be planned for and built into the placement structure in a clear and transparent way. Strategies to deal with non-attainment of learning outcomes or with unsatisfactory opportunities for learning should be provided for. Academic or placement staff should comply with any regulations for completion of visit reports or of placement reports and should be prepared to contribute to the post-placement assessment process.

The main responsibilities for the HEI during placement include:

- Maintaining the three-way contact mechanisms with appropriate communication throughout the duration of the placement;
- On-going assessment of the learning outcomes;
- Timely feedback and formative assessment on the attainment and evidence of the required learning.

1.3 Post-placement

When the students return to the HEI they should be provided with opportunities to reflect on the learning gained and to report on their experiences. This can be built into the preparation phase for other students. Ideally, the students should be able to integrate aspects of their workplace learning into later phases of their studies, for example through project work.

On conclusion of the placement process the HEI should complete the relevant summative assessment process and the awarding of the appropriate grades and credit.

Feedback from the employer on the student's attainment of learning outcomes, attendance, timekeeping, aptitude, ability to use initiative, team work and communication skills should be formally sought. In addition, employer feedback on the placement process should be actively sought and used to inform the process.

Every opportunity should be taken for the HEIs to learn from the student experience and to ensure that the placement experience is part of a continuum of involvement with the employer. Possibilities for undergraduate project developments often arise seamlessly from student placement experiences.

In summary, following the placement process the HEI 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.

2.0 Guidelines for Employers

2.1 Pre-placement

It is important that employers are clear about their role in the placement process and about their motivation for getting involved and that they have realistic expectations of the contribution that the student will be able to make.

Employers should be encouraged to develop a specification for the job, including the type of position and a description of the work involved, in order to assist students when making their applications.

Throughout the selection phase of the process, employers should work closely with the HEI to ensure that the placement offers are made in a timely manner and that arrangements are confirmed as early as possible.

The student should receive a letter from the employer confirming their placement. The letter should state the date of the placement, starting time, location, person to whom they report on the first day, and salary, if any.

Employers should be aware of the designated member of the HEI staff with responsibility for managing the placements.

Familiarity with the expected learning outcomes for the placement should help the employer to design the placement, in order to ensure that the best opportunity will be provided for the student to attain the required learning. In viewing themselves as partners and facilitators of the learning experience, the employer should also consider what site-specific training/induction will be needed for the student.

Employers will need to ensure that they are fully aware of the different procedural requirements for the placement, including the reporting and management requirements.

Employers should consider the appointment of a mentor to act as a point of contact for the HEI in planning the placement and in the management of the process. The preparation and support of the mentor should be undertaken in conjunction with the HEI.

Prior to the placement the employer should:

- Prepare an appropriate job specification and engage in the student selection process;
- Clarify the contact details in the employer organisation and the HEI with responsibility for the student placement;
- Appoint and prepare a mentor to support the student in the workplace.

2.2 During Placement

Placement students should be treated in the same manner as other staff, where feasible, including communication, discipline, and staff evaluation processes.

To ensure the students are made aware of their obligations to the employer, the employer should clearly advise students of any ethical or confidentiality issues related to the organisation.

Induction and orientation activities should raise awareness of health and safety, security, and other site-specific issues.

The employer, work supervisor, or the appointed mentor should ensure that the student is provided with all relevant learning opportunities and should assist the student in setting realistic learning goals. The appropriate employer representative should be able to contribute to the formal assessment process if required and to comment on issues such as attendance, time-keeping, initiative, teamwork and aptitude.

Regular and constructive feedback should be given to the student in order to improve performance and stimulate learning. Feedback can be both formal and informal. Feedback should be sufficient, specific, relevant, timely, and include recommendations for improvement.

Any issues surrounding the placement should be communicated to the appointed HEI contact in a timely manner.

During placement the employer should:

- Provide suitable induction and supervision arrangements for the student;
- Provide regular and appropriate feedback to the student and the HEI.

2.3 Post-placement

The employer should provide the student with an overview of their performance in the placement process and of areas they might improve in. The employer should also invite suggestions from the student on how the placement opportunity might be improved.

The employer should provide input into the assessment process for the HEI, as well as providing feedback on the placement process and the student performance.

The employer should consider how the HEI engagement could be deepened through research, undergraduate and postgraduate project specification and course development interactions.

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.

3.0 Guidelines for Students

3.1 Pre-placement

Prior to the placement, the student should be clear on the learning that they are expected to achieve in the placement process and the reporting and evidence requirement appropriate for that learning. They should be aware of the assessment strategy and of the supports that may be available to assist in tracking, and reflecting on, their learning.

Students should prepare for the placement experience by making full use of the supports that the HEI provides. This is likely to include the development of a CV and the completion of different application processes, including undergoing any interviews required by the employer and meeting students who have returned from placements.

Students should comply with the HEI and Employer agreements for the acceptance of job offers, for example, in most cases, the HEIs require the student to accept the first job offer that they receive and to withdraw from other ongoing applications in order to manage the placements of large numbers of students.

Students should familiarise themselves with particular placement organisations, through web searches, company literature, personal contacts, past students, etc.

Students should be aware of and comply with specific requirements to take up the particular placement including travel, visa, accommodation, bank accounts, insurance and tax etc.

Prior to the placement students should:

- Familiarise themselves with the learning outcomes and assessment strategies relevant to the placement process within their programme;
- Engage with the application and preparation processes within the HEI;
- Prepare appropriately for the specific placement.

3.2 During Placement

Students are expected to conform to all the conditions and rules that apply to employees in the appointed workplace. Students have a responsibility to meet the norms and expectations for professional conduct in the particular field of work that they are undertaking through the work placement. It is helpful for students if these norms, responsibilities, and expectations are clearly stated and understood at the outset of the work placement. Students should ensure that they are fully informed of their responsibilities including the need for confidentiality, intellectual property rights, and data protection. Students should also be aware of their rights to be treated in accordance with applicable legislation and within a safe working environment.

Students should take every opportunity to exploit the learning potential of their situation. It is likely that during the work placement, students will take on the responsibility for managing their own learning and professional relationships, and for tracking and recording their own progress and achievements. To help in the process of managing their own learning, students may consider personal development planning and learning logs, which may have already been started under guidance in the third-level institution.

Many employers see the placement as a recruitment experience so students should ensure that, through their behaviour and professionalism, they maximise their own career opportunities and also the potential for repeat placement opportunities for future cohorts of students.

Students should maintain appropriate contact with the HEI including feedback on progress to both the HEI and employer.

While in the workplace, students should make sure to comply with all of their course requirements including any assessment activities, learning logs and compilation of evidence of learning.

Students should use the placement experience as an opportunity to develop a network of professional contacts within their particular discipline and explore opportunities for further research or project engagement.

During the placement students should:

- Conduct themselves professionally at all times;
- Take responsibility for the management of their own learning;
- Seek opportunities to develop a network of professional contacts.

3.3 Post-placement

On completion of the work placement students should engage in the work placement assessment processes including the completion of reporting and the submission of feedback to both HEI and employer.

Following the period of work placement, students should take the opportunity to reflect on the learning gained and endeavour to integrate aspects of this learning into their programme of study.

Students should share lessons from their placement experiences with peers and with students in the earlier years of third-level education, to help other students appreciate the value and variety of work placements.

Students should contribute feedback to the employer and to the HEI, on both the placement experience and the management and organisation of the placement, for the preparation of placements for future cohorts of students.

Following the placement students should:

- Complete all require assessment and reporting stages;
- Share their experience of the work placement with other students;
- Maintain contact and engagement with the employer as appropriate.

Contents

Tripartite Learning Agreement comprising:

Placement Learning Outcomes and Assessment Strategy

Contact Details and Sign off

Job Specification

Workplace Induction Checklist

Workplace Learning Journal Guide

Evaluation of Placement Process - Student Perspective

Placement Learning Outcomes and Assessment Strategy

To be completed by the student and HEI prior to placement

Academic Structure of Placement	
Stage of Programme	
Mandatory or Elective	
Number of academic credits	
Duration of placement (weeks)	Minimum
	Optimum
Normal commencement date	

Learning Outcomes of Placement
On completion of this placement the student will be able to:
1
2
3
4
5

Placement Review Activities		
Type	Participants	Date/Dates
Meeting at workplace		
Telephone or Skype call to workplace		
Meeting at HEI		

Assessment and Reporting Requirements			
Assessment/Report	Description or Reference	Marks Awarded	Submission Date
Blog/Learning Diary			
Reflective Journal			
Interim Report			
Final Report			
Oral Presentation			
Employer Evaluation			

Contact Details and Sign off

To be completed prior to commencement of placement and copy to be retained by each of the three signatories.

Employer Details		
Organisation name		
Address		
Workplace Mentor or Supervisor name		Title
Department		
Address		
Phone		email

Student Details		
Higher Education Institution		
Course title		Stage
Department address		
Student name		Student No.
Address while on placement		
Phone		email

Academic Contact Details		
Higher Education Institution		
Contact name		Title
Department		
Address		
Phone		email
Alternate contact name		Title
Phone		email

Signatures	
Employer Representative	Date
Higher Education Institution Representative	Date
Student	Date

Outline Job Specification

To be provided by the employer in cooperation with the HEI in advance of placement

Outline Job Specification	
Job title	Pay
Work location	
Description of work to be undertaken by student	
Key skills and aptitudes required	
Key responsibilities	
Main learning opportunities	
Hours and Days of attendance weekly	
Line Manager's title and name	Phone email

Workplace Induction Checklist

To be completed by the student in cooperation with the employer at the beginning of placement

Induction Information		
Item	Completed	To be completed
Access and security arrangements		
Confidentiality, intellectual property and non-disclosure policies		
Codes of conduct, housekeeping, dress codes		
Computer usage policies		
Workplace hazards and safe working practices		
Working hours, refreshment facilities and holidays		
Arrangements for sick leave		
Payroll arrangements		
Organisational reporting structures and procedures		

Workplace Learning Journal

To be completed by the student with cooperation of the workplace mentor during placement

Student name	
Organisation name	
Job title	Start date
	End date
Work location	

Week	Task / Activity	Skills required	Supervisor Initials

Linking learning to learning outcomes:

Learning event	What did you learn?	Relevant learning outcome(s)	Evidence

Reflections on the learning event:

Learning event	What did you learn?	Relevant learning outcome(s)	Evidence

Reflections on the learning event:

Note

Reflecting on learning obtained and linking the learning to the required learning outcomes or competences helps the learner to link their experiences to the learning outcomes and to identify potential gaps in the learning. This can be very effectively integrated into a reflective journal or through an on-line learning diary format. Student Diary Pro is an example of an on-line system which can effectively support the planning and management of work placement learning. Further information is provided in Appendix D.

Evaluation of Placement Process Student Perspective

To be completed by the student following completion of placement

Student Feedback	
Student name	
Organisation name	
Job title	Start date
	End date
Work location	
Description of work actually undertaken	
What prior skills and aptitudes were necessary?	
What additional prior skills and aptitudes were desirable?	
Did learning opportunities match learning outcomes?	

Securing Work Placement

Please circle as appropriate 1 = Poor 2 = Fair 3 = Good 4 = Excellent

Application process	1	2	3	4
Offer and acceptance stages	1	2	3	4
Comments regarding securing work placement:				

Preparation for Work Placement

Please circle as appropriate 1 = Poor 2 = Fair 3 = Good 4 = Excellent

CV and Interview preparation	1	2	3	4
Job specification	1	2	3	4
Clarity of learning outcomes and assessment	1	2	3	4
Schedule of review communications	1	2	3	4
Support service details (point of contact)	1	2	3	4
Feedback from past students	1	2	3	4
Logistics (accommodation, travel, banking, permits etc)	1	2	3	4
Comments regarding pre-placement provisions/preparations:				

Work Placement Experience

Please circle as appropriate 1 = Poor 2 = Fair 3 = Good 4 = Excellent

Induction phase	1	2	3	4
Work place supervision	1	2	3	4
Work schedule and workplace environment	1	2	3	4
Responsibilities and scope of role	1	2	3	4
Placement support service	1	2	3	4
Communications with third-level institution	1	2	3	4
Reporting and assessment activities	1	2	3	4
Opportunities for reflective learning	1	2	3	4
Logistical arrangements	1	2	3	4
Relevance to career goals	1	2	3	4
Payment	1	2	3	4
Comments regarding placement experience:				

This is not a part of the assessment process for your marks or grades for placement. This evaluation will help employers and the HEIs to improve the placement process and will contribute to the process for students in subsequent years.

Contents

Tripartite Learning Agreement comprising:

Job and Applicant Specification

Placement Learning Outcomes and Assessment Strategy

Contact Details and Sign off

Workplace Induction Checklist

Employer's Student Appraisal Form

Evaluation of Placement Process –Employer Perspective

Job and Applicant Specification

To be provided by the employer in cooperation with the HEI in advance of placement

Outline Job Specification

Job title

Pay

Work location

Description of work to be undertaken by student

Key responsibilities

Main learning opportunities

Hours and days of attendance weekly

Applicant Specification

Key technical competences

Key generic competences

Placement Learning Outcomes and Assessment Strategy

To be completed by the student and the HEI prior to placement

Academic Structure of Placement	
Stage of programme	
Mandatory or elective	
Number of academic credits	
Duration of placement (Weeks)	Minimum
	Optimum
Normal commencement date	

Learning Outcomes of Placement	
On completion of this placement the student will be able to:	
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	

Placement Review Activities		
Type	Participants	Date/Dates
Meeting at workplace		
Telephone or Skype call to workplace		
Meeting at HEI		

Assessment and Reporting Requirements			
Assessment/Report	Description or Reference	Marks Awarded	Submission Date
Blog/Learning Diary			
Reflective Journal			
Interim Report			
Final Report			
Oral Presentation			
Employer Evaluation			

Contact Details and Sign off

To be completed prior to commencement of placement and copy to be retained by each of the three signatories.

Employer Details		
Organisation name		
Address		
Workplace Mentor or Supervisor name		Title
Department		
Address		
Phone		email

Student Details		
Higher Education Institution		
Course title		Stage
Department address		
Student name		Student No.
Address while on placement		
Phone		email

Academic Contact Details		
Higher Education Institution		
Contact name		Title
Department		
Address		
Phone		email
Alternate contact name		Title
Phone		email

Signatures	
Employer Representative	Date
Higher Education Institution Representative	Date
Student	Date

Workplace Induction Checklist

To be completed by the student in cooperation with the employer at the beginning of placement

Induction Information		
Item	Completed	To be completed
Access and security arrangements		
Confidentiality, intellectual property and non-disclosure policies		
Codes of conduct, housekeeping, dress codes		
Computer usage policies		
Workplace hazards and safe working practices		
Working hours, refreshment facilities and holidays		
Arrangements for sick leave		
Payroll arrangements		
Organisational reporting structures and procedures		

Employer's Student Appraisal Form

To be completed by the employer after placement

Student Appraisal	
Student name	
Organisation name	
Job title	Start Date
	End Date
Work location	

Did the student:	Never	Sometimes	Usually	Always
Complete tasks effectively and efficiently	1	2	3	4
Demonstrate knowledge of their discipline	1	2	3	4
Demonstrate a willingness to seek out knowledge and acquire new skills	1	2	3	4
Learn from their mistakes	1	2	3	4
Show appropriate initiative	1	2	3	4
Exhibit good planning, timekeeping and organisational skills	1	2	3	4
Communicate effectively with others	1	2	3	4
Demonstrate professional conduct in the workplace	1	2	3	4
Work well with others	1	2	3	4

Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
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Evaluation of Placement Process Employer Perspective

To be completed by the employer after placement

Placement Process Evaluation	
Student name	
Organisation name	
Job title	Start date
	End date
Work location	

Selection Process	Please circle as appropriate 1 = Poor 2 = Fair 3 = Good 4 = Excellent			
Application process	1	2	3	4
Offer and acceptance	1	2	3	4
Comments regarding selection process:				

Preparation for Work Placement	Please circle as appropriate 1 = Poor 2 = Fair 3 = Good 4 = Excellent			
Job specification	1	2	3	4
Defined aims and learning outcomes	1	2	3	4
Clarity on assessment requirements	1	2	3	4
Clear contact and communications	1	2	3	4
Logistics (accommodation, travel, banking, permits etc)	1	2	3	4
Comments regarding pre-placement provisions/preparations:				

Work Placement Experience	Please circle as appropriate 1 = Poor 2 = Fair 3 = Good 4 = Excellent			
Induction	1	2	3	4
Fit with predetermined learning outcomes	1	2	3	4
Work place supervision	1	2	3	4
Communications with third-level institution	1	2	3	4
Reporting and assessment activities	1	2	3	4
Comments regarding placement experience:				

Signed

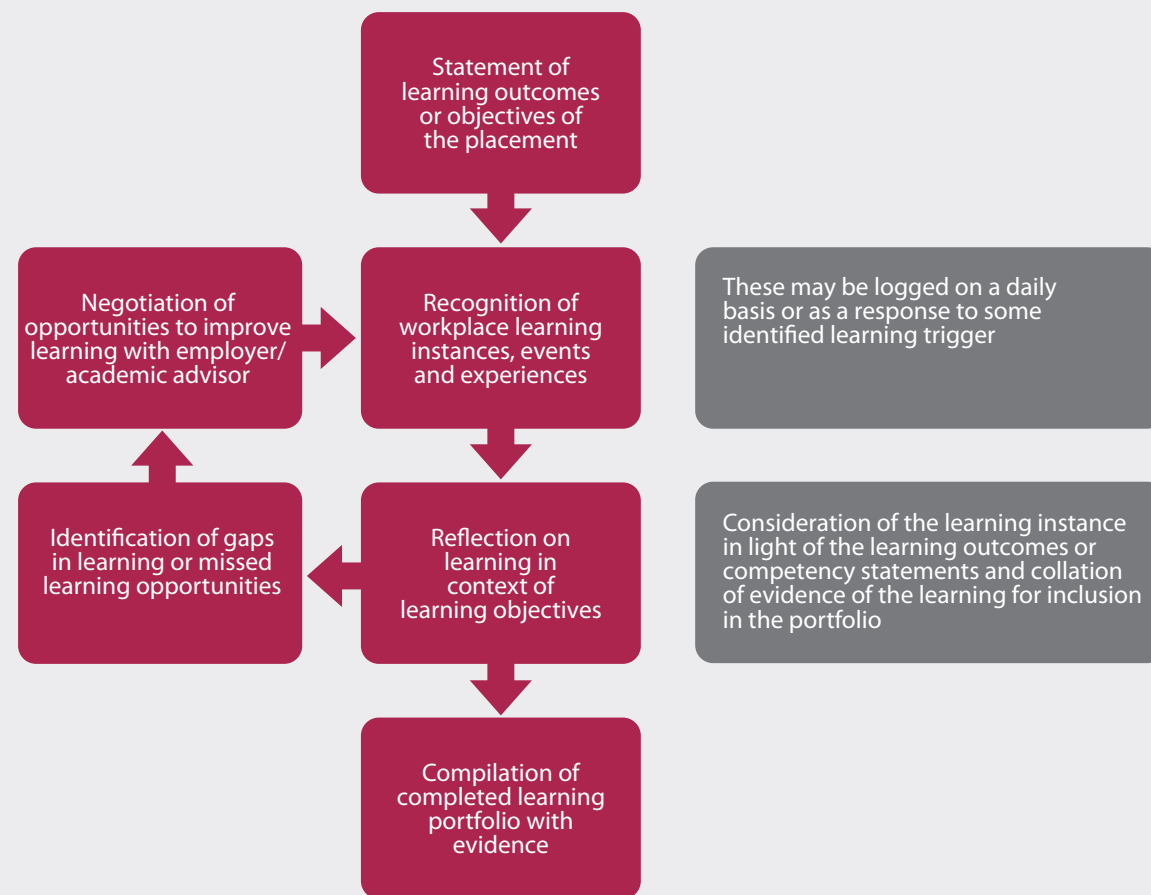
Date

Appendix D: Note on Management and Assessment of Placement Learning

In almost all of the instances of placement reviewed a form of portfolio, learning journal, log or diary is used as a basis for the self-assessment of their learning by the students involved in the placement. In order for this to be effective the student needs to develop a reflective view of their learning and to be able to interpret their experiences in the context of defined learning outcomes. In some cases, the learning outcomes will be defined for all students on the programme by the HEI and in some cases, they are personalised and negotiated between the HEI, the employer and the student. Often they are stated as broad high level aspirations but they may also be broken down into numerous specific competences.

Learning Process and Self-Assessment

A consideration of the assessment of the workplace learning begins with the learning process itself. The learning process will often follow the following stages:



By encouraging the student to compile their own portfolio of learning complete with evidence and by ensuring that the student is equipped with the skills to reflect on their own learning the development of an autonomous learning style is facilitated. Portfolios have the benefit of allowing a diverse platform in which to compile the variety and complexity of learning and personal development experiences that form the placement learning. The learning process outlined requires the student to make explicit connections between the learning experiences and the planned learning outcomes and to assume some responsibility for the attainment of all of the agreed learning outcomes. The portfolio approach is sufficiently flexible to allow the situated nature of the experience and the variety of potential learning environments to be accommodated.

Assessment of the learning experience needs to be both formative and summative. The academic advisor needs to be in a position to advise and support the student in their interpretation of their learning and to support them in seeking additional learning experiences where appropriate. In addition, the academic advisor needs to assess the overall evidence of the learning through the portfolio, interview, presentation, report or other means in order to complete the learning experience assessment.

Employer Role in the Assessment Process

There is much research to support the view that employers value both technical competency and soft skills. The REAP project research showed that employers rated ability to work in a team and willingness to learn more highly than technical competences in the particular field when asked their views on the skills that students bring to placement and those that students gain from placement. However, there are different views on the role, if any, of the employer in the assessment process. In some cases, the employer input is sought informally as a general indication of the student's performance during the placement process and the employer is encouraged to raise any issues with the student and with the academic supervisor as soon as possible.

In other cases, a format for formal grading of the student performance by the employer has been developed and this becomes part of the overall assessment of placement. The employer is often asked to grade the student based on the following criteria, or similar, in addition to discipline or site specific criteria appropriate to the particular job or role:

Workplace behaviour

- Timekeeping
- Appropriate dress and attitude

Teamwork skills

- Listens to and respects contribution of others in group setting
- Contributes opinions and ideas

Initiative

- Asks for assistance when needed
- Demonstrates energy and persistence in completing tasks
- Positive attitude towards change and learning

Communication skills

- Demonstrates listening and questioning ability
- Ability to clearly communicate and report on work objectives and experiences

In general, an assessment process that includes the employer's views formally and encourages autonomous learning through a reflective self-assessment process by the student provides optimum opportunities for learning and engagement.

IT Supports for the Management and Assessment of Placement Learning

On-line learning journals can provide an effective means of supporting and managing the attainment of desired learning outcomes during the work placement period. They are particularly helpful for HEI staff managing a geographically distributed group of placement students. Using an on-line system can help to address many of the difficulties with recording workplace learning reported by the students and will also effectively provide timely feedback and formative assessment.

The essential elements of the system are:

- The definition of the required 'competences' that the student will gain from the placement experience. These will be generated from the agreed learning outcomes and may be negotiated with the employer and the student as appropriate;
- Regular diary entries by the student. In these entries the student will describe and reflect on learning gained through the work and will relate this learning to one or more of the agreed competences;
- The uploading of evidence of attainment of learning and competences by the student. A variety of file types can be entered and attached to particular competences;
- Regular review of the diary by the responsible HEI staff who acts as tutor for the learning. The tutor view allows a review of the regularity of the entries, the frequency of the competences claimed and the evidence attached. In addition the tutor can comment on the diary and offer guidance to the student.

Student Diary Pro Pilot

Through the REAP project Student Diary Pro was selected and used with a pilot group of placement students. Student Diary Pro is a MOODLE add on that provides a flexible and effective system to monitor and manage learner development. In essence, it is a reflective diary that can be used for monitoring student work placement, project work or work based learning.

Student Diary Pro provides a mechanism to enable teaching institutions to monitor learner progress against a definable set of competences. Learners record their progress in a reflective journal supported by submissions to a personal ePortfolio. This replaces current manual processes in a secure online environment, which provides up-to-date information for learner and teacher (mentor/tutor/supervisor) alike.

Student Diary Pro allows students to record the activities that they perform, to match these activities against appropriate agreed competences. Students are able to reflect on their learning, set personal goals, claim competences that they may have developed and upload 'evidence' to support their claim - a wide range of file types is supported.

The diary system is online and is a managed and interactive system that enables the tutor to monitor, on a real-time basis, the progress of the student. Student entries are analysed by a feature which generates overview reports. These reports are then reviewed by tutors who can advise students on the balance of competences being claimed, and direct future work or activity. Students can also view these reports.

During the course of this research work, Student Diary Pro was piloted by a group of 66 Social Case Students at Institute of Technology, Tallaght, Dublin. The students were given an induction session on the software prior to their placement. One of the key benefits noted was the simple interactive interface that the system used.

Students reported that Student Diary Pro helped them to reflect on what they were learning in the context of the desired learning outcomes and competences sought. Knowing that they were working toward the pre-defined, agreed competences improved their confidence in the work that they were undertaking.

I found it very beneficial because when you are working you wonder if you are really doing anything that is relevant to study. But when you go onto Diary Pro and see all the competences and think about what you are achieving, it puts it into perspective for you. It is confidence boosting as well because when you actually write about what you did, you can see how the placement matches what you are supposed to be learning.

I didn't really realise how much I was doing until I reviewed my diary. It allowed me to think about how what I'm doing fits into the policies and procedures for my work - I wouldn't really have considered that beforehand.

Because the learning diary was facilitated in this way, students tended to make regular entries and not to leave the completion of the diary until the end of the process. They knew that their entries would be reviewed regularly. Students also felt that the opportunity to set goals and monitor their own competency development was useful in helping them organise their learning.

The process of reflection through the online system was highlighted as being very important to their professional development. The diary also helped students to practice some of practical skills that they would need in their profession.

I was able to stand back and reflect on what is actually going on in the organisation. I was able to question some things within myself and my approach to the work.

It's a good practice of recording. For example, in residential practice you must maintain fairly detailed reports and Diary Pro gets you into the practice of recoding what's happening as it is happening.

Student Diary Pro enabled students to analyse which competences they have completed and which were still outstanding. One of the embedded reporting formats allows students to see the frequency with which particular competences were claimed. This is a very useful format for identifying gaps in the learning which can then be addressed. In the pilot study, students negotiated with their workplace supervisor to get work tasks that would enable them to gain competences that were outstanding and thus took ownership for directing their own learning.

In the Competence Overview Report, both the student and the academic advisor are provided with an overview of the competences against which claims have been made and evidence of learning which has been uploaded. Competency claims are highlighted as well as evidence of learning.

Academic advisors on the programme reported that the software gave them regular contact with the students and enabled them to monitor the type of work that students were doing from a distance. A comment facility ensured that academic advisors could guide and support students and advise them of the kind of tasks that they could complete to enable them to claim a particular outstanding competency.

During the pilot study the students' work in diary pro was not graded. However, a grading rubric has since been developed and put into use in the Institute of Technology Tallaght. The software has been adopted by a number of different disciplines and the trials have extended to a number of different HEIs.

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ISBN 978-1-906953-07-2



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