Enhancing Employability in Music:

An Ethnographic Study into Students' Work-Based Learning Experiences

Simone Krüger

PART I: THE PROJECT

Context

> *Employability… is a set of skills, knowledge and personal attributes that make an individual more likely to secure and be successful in their chosen occupation(s) to the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.* (Little 2006:2)

Employability is one of the most frequent buzzwords used in discussions surrounding the student experience in higher education today, which often seek to assess the impact of education on students' transformations and acquisition of those skills that are particularly sought by potential employers. The significance of enhancing university students' employability has long been recognised by the UK government (Yorke 2004:3), also evident in the Dearing report (1997) and, more recently the Leitch Report (2006). The concern with developing strategies and practice for the enhancement of student employability has notably impacted on HEI's initiatives, which appear to be numerous and varied across subject areas.

This is further evident in the growing body of academic discourse in this area of theory, which often focuses on what employability means in the context of higher education (e.g. Yorke 2006), or the ways in which employability can be integrated into the curriculum (e.g. Yorke and Knight 2006), or linked to meaningful assessment strategies (Knight and Yorke 2006), or lend itself towards specific pedagogic approaches (The Pedagogy for Employability Group 2006), including the use of PDP in enhancing students' employability (Ward *et al* 2006). Other, more general discourse exists on the relationship between employability and *work-based learning* (e.g. Little *et al* 2006:2; Lucas and Tan 2007) or *work-related learning* (Moreland 2005:4).

Yet only few initiatives and writings seem to exist within the subject area of music that focus on students' acquisition of skills relating to arts administration and event management, and that seek to assess the impact of such learning experiences on their employability in the music and creative industries more widely. Examples include discussions on employability in the performing arts in higher education (e.g. Brown 2003a), or the employment of performing arts graduates (e.g. Brown 2003b), or employability in the creative industries more generally (e.g. Ball 2003). However, as Yorke (2004:9) notes, graduates' perception of preparedness for the world of work is little researched.

Furthermore, employability-related learning most often occurs in workplaces away from the higher education institution, requiring students independently to negotiate between two kinds of culture. We thus sought to bridge the gap between employer and higher education institution, and with it, the discrepancy between employers' needs and what we can supply through a meaningful triangular engagement between student, employer and academia. We hoped that this would enable us to study and understand students' WBL experiences within the context of our own perceptions as employers and academics. Indeed, academics are well positioned to focus on students' experiences for an understanding of their employability.

Student

Academia

Employer

Employer

Academia
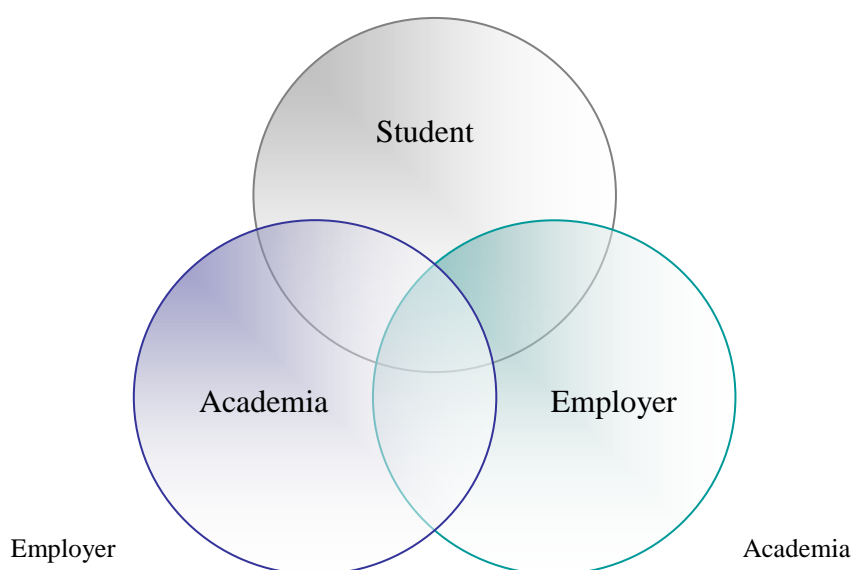
Given this apparent void in existing research and literature, this project thus sought to study and understand—by applying ethnography with its attendant methodology of participant-observation and informal interviewing, combined with portfolio-based evidence produced by the participants—students' experiences during work-based learning (WBL) placements in music. Work-based learning is a useful and 'radical approach to the notion of a university education' (Holford et al. 1998:2), which can provide students with opportunities and experiences that enable them to enter into employment once they graduate. In other words, WBL provides first-hand experiences for a greater understanding of students' chosen area of employment. WBL is useful for developing key skills that can be transferred to the workplace. As a result of WBL placements, students will grow as a person, and their future career paths may be influenced significantly.

The WBL-placements lasted from Sept 2008 until April 2009, offering opportunities to students enrolled on second and third year WBL modules to participate in the planning, organising and running of the Annual Conference of the British Forum for Ethnomusicology (hosted by LJMU's Popular Music Studies unit from 16 – 19 April 2009; for further details see www.bfe.org.uk). Thus, from the start of the project, it was anticipated that the placements would be beneficial academically, as well as for gaining important work experience. We were particularly interested in the impact of these placements on students' employability and their perception of it in relation to their future careers in the music as well as other culture-related industries.

From the outset, it was imperative to acknowledge that employability is a personal, multifaceted characteristic of a student, shaped by social, cultural, academic, economic, demographic and other factors. Employability will thus develop differently amongst different students, as each student brings his/her own unique personal circumstances and lived experiences. Employability is thus a woolly concept that renders impossible any attempt of imposing objective, 'measurable' criteria for comparison and analysis upon differing individuals. For these reasons, we adopted an interpretative, phenomenological approach to assess the impact of WBL placements on students' employability, whilst taking into account the voices of individual students.

Aims and objectives

The project aimed to implement and critically evaluate specific practice for the enhancement of student employability in higher education. Situated within the general subject area of music, the project focused on students' acquisition of skills relating to arts administration and management, and sought (wherever possible) to assess the impact of such learning experiences on their employability in the music and creative industries more widely. The project thus served a dual research and teaching function, namely by raising awareness of the opportunities that work-based learning affords to music education at universities, and, through applying ethnographic research in university education, enhancing educators' appreciation of ethnography for studying and understanding students' complex and multifaceted learning experiences within the context of employability enhancement. To this end, the project integrated teaching and research into a meaningful relationship (for discussions on the teaching-research nexus, see Jenkins and Healey 2005; Jenkins, Healey and Zetter 2007) by fostering a proactive approach to the learning and teaching of students in higher education.

More specifically, the project sought to achieve the following objectives:

- To offer opportunities to second and third year undergraduate students for participating in and experiencing the full spectrum of planning, organising and running the Annual Conference of the British Forum for Ethnomusicology (held at LJMU from 16 – 19 April 2009) through the provision of ten work-based learning placements (the selection of students involved a formal recruitment procedure);

- To study and understand—by applying ethnography with its attendant methods of participant-observation and informal interviewing, combined

with portfolio-based evidence—students' experiences during work-based learning placements in practical and academic music-related environments prior to, during and after the event;

- To gain insights into the ways in which students' changes in attitude and perspective during WBL placements impact on their employability in careers specifically related to music.

Methodology

Ethnographic research was employed in this project as a means to explore and understand students' complex and multifaceted learning experiences. It allowed us to gain insights into the development of students' skills, knowledge and personal attributes during their WBL placements, thus to ascertain whether students' WBL experiences had an impact on their employability more generally. Ethnographic approaches were deemed particularly suitable for this project, as work-based learning by its very nature involves an organic and reflexive process of personal development (PDP), and thus necessitates the flexibility and depth typically afforded by ethnographic research methods in evaluating participants' changes in attitude and perspective.

More specifically, the project involved the following methods for data collection, analysis and interpretation of results:

- The project was primarily driven by ethnography as a self-reflexive method of research and way of writing, allowing us to gain first-hand observations into students' lived experiences during their WBL placements. Any and all aspects of students' involvement in the conference organisation were observed, including their progress reported during regular update meetings, work at allocated tasks prior to and during the event, written and aural communication with tutors/peers/delegates, etc. Collected materials included fieldnotes, photographic images, email communication, and notes from informal discussions, which provided the basic writing materials for the project report.

- Observations prior to and during the conference were followed up by semi-structured, informal interviews with students individually, while focusing on students' experiences of (any and all facets of) activities related to the planning, organising and running of the conference. A semi-structured questionnaire was prepared by the project leaders, with questions subdivided into the following sections:

  o **Applying for the post.** Why did you apply for the conference assistant post? What did you think you would gain from doing this? How did you find the application process? How did you prepare for the interview? Had you experienced an interview before? How was this experience the same/different? What do you think you learnt from it that you think would help you in future interviews?

- o **Your role in the organising team.** When you were offered a post, we designated particular tasks to you based on your performance in the interview. Do you feel that we gave you the right job? Were you familiar with undertaking some of the task we had asked you to do, or were they new to you? Did you have any initial concerns/worries about your role (what you had to do, defining your role, working with new people, etc)? If so, what were they? If not, what experiences have you had that you felt equipped you for it? Can you give us some examples of obstacles you encountered whilst undertaking the tasks, and how you went about overcoming them? Do you think that your role changed or evolved as time went on? i.e. as you became more confident in what you were doing, overcame tasks, became more aware of what the conference was and what it entailed, etc?
- o **Working and communicating as a team.** What are your own experiences of working with other members of the conference team? Did you know them, or had you worked with them before this placement? What do you think you have learnt from working with new people outside of your friendship group or course? What insights has this given you in terms of working in groups in the world of work, rather than just in university projects? Did you experience any issues or problems in communicating with other members of the group? If yes, why do you think that might have been, and in what ways did you overcome this? Can you give some examples of when the team worked well together and when you think it might have worked more efficiently? Did you set your own deadlines to do things? How did the team meetings help you to do this? We knew very little about our final budget until it was almost the start of the conference, and this is a common scenario in events-related management. How did you manage this in relation to your specific tasks? Each team was involved to some extent in dealing with companies, businesses and departments both inside and outside of LJMU. What were your experiences of this, and can you give some examples of the different types of 'negotiations' you were involved in, for example in relation to marketing, information gathering, getting free promotional materials, etc.
- o **Experiencing the conference**. What tasks were you allocated during the conference? Describe what these tasks entailed. What problems did you encounter in conducting these tasks, and how did you solve them? Describe whether and how you worked as a team with both other assistants and LJMU staff. Did you encounter any problems here? What was your experience dealing with international delegates? Describe any problems you encountered, and how you dealt with them? What did you gain from working during the conference, e.g. socially; academically; professionally; etc?
- o **World of work after the conference**. What do you think have been the key experiences in doing this placement that have prepared you more for the world of work? Do you think it was useful to work with other students on this project? Why/why not? Have you applied for jobs using this post as an example of your work experience? If you have been interviewed for a post, have they asked you about this work

experience? Do you think you would go into events management in the future? Is there anything else you would like to mention?

- The interviews also sought to assess WBL learning strategies embedded into the LJMU worked-based learning modules and outcomes. Here, we wished to ascertain whether students gained a clear understanding of the following:

  o The context of the organisation and its function;
  o The role of the student undertaken within that organisation;
  o The student's personal performance, and how he/she made a positive contribution to the organisation's working environment;
  o The ways in which the WBL experience has drawn upon previous modules in popular music studies and media and cultural studies;
  o The ways in which this work experience impacts on the student's career plans.

  The interview also assessed whether students achieved the eight graduate skills during their WBL placement: analysing & solving problems; verbal communication; personal planning & organising; numerical reasoning; team working & interpersonal skills; written communication; initiative; information literacy & ICT skills, which form key parts of the LJMU WoW agenda.

  A research assistant was engaged to transcribe the audio-recorded ethnographic interviews. Excerpts of the interviews are used as illustrative matter throughout the report.

- Ethnographic research was complemented by analyses of students' reflective journals (PDP) produced as part of the WBL modules so as to capture an even more accurate reflection and richer account of the student learning experience throughout their placements. Students PDPs were also used as illustrative matter in the final report

Ethical considerations

Since the project involved students at LJMU, full ethical approval was sought from the LJMU Research Ethics Committee (REC) prior to commencement of the study so as to ensure that no risk will result for participants. Participation in the study was voluntary, and students' were given the choice to be veiled by anonymity and confidentiality. Participants' rights were respected at any time, including the wish to withdraw from participating in the project. Upon appointment onto the placements, students were provided with detailed information and asked to give their written consent to voluntarily participate in the research project (Appendix I). A risk assessment was undertaken at the conference venue to identify any potential risks to the students who would be working as 'employees' (Appendix II).

PART II: PROJECT PROCESS

The WBL application process

Whilst students were given the opportunity to enhance their work-based skills and knowledge, the project also sought to provide students with 'real life' experiences of seeking and working within paid employment. The WBL placements thus involved a formal application process, initiated through an advertisement that was emailed to all second- and third year students in Popular Music Studies and Media and Cultural Studies at Liverpool John Moores University. The advertisement was specifically targeted at final year students enrolled on WBL modules, which include the requirement of a work placement.

WBL is a result of LJMU's strategic employability initiative with the aim of 'becoming the UK University whose graduates are most valued by employers' and whose 'strategic approach will be to encourage and enable all students to develop, alongside their academic achievements, the dual generic sets of skills demanded and valued by employers' (see http://www.ljmu.ac.uk/WoW/staff/96457.htm). As a consequence, work-based learning has become integral to our degree programmes with a high demand for placements amongst students. Consequently, we received thirty five requests for application packs, which were sent in two rounds, namely in May 2008 and September 2008, and included a covering letter, a job and person specification, a LJMU application form and a LJMU equal opportunities form (Appendix III).

In the application pack, students were asked to submit the completed LJMU application and equal opportunities form. Yet out of the thirty-five interested students, we only received seven applications in the initial application round in May 08, followed by a further eight applications in the second application round in September 08. Given the initial demand for application packs, we were surprised by the low return, which may be due to a number of reasons. For example, the initial application deadline was set during the assessment period before the summer vacation with the aim of early appointments, which would have facilitated better advance planning for both ourselves and students (for example, in not having to find an alternative placement). Yet during this period, students still completed assignments, essays and other work, and perhaps had little concern for the subsequent academic year.

Furthermore, the job & person specification and application forms were based on LJMU templates, which may have appeared a little 'over-burdening' and complex, requiring extensive details from the students. Yet these forms mimicked closely the real-life experiences of job applicants, encouraging students to reflect upon their skills and demonstrate their suitability for the post, thus requiring critical thinking and reflection from them. This challenge, together with the bad timing, may have led certain students to decide not to proceed with an application. Interestingly, however, those fifteen applications that were submitted displayed high levels of thought and reflection, and resulted in twelve applicants being called for an interview and presentation in October 2008.

Below are examples of written statements provided by two shortlisted applicants, which reflect students' critical engagement with the job description and person specification whilst providing concrete examples of how their knowledge, skills and experience would benefit the tasks of student conference assistant (Ex. 1).

Example 1: Successful applicants' statements

Written application statement by Rachel Dyer (final year undergraduate in Popular Music Studies)
I have been the course representative for Popular Music Studies for the last two years. I have helped students with a number of academic and personal queries on a number of different levels and act as mediator between the academic staff and the students. The feedback that I have given has helped in making changes that benefit the students…. Recently, after the issue was raised about a taught module, I was able to negotiate between students and lecturer to obtain a class extension for a module assignment.

I have been involved with the LJMU Anime Society also for the last two years; the first year I was events promoter and in the second year I was Treasurer and often some secretarial roles. With the other administrative members we organised a number of events and have consistent attendance. As Treasurer it is normally my responsibility to acquire the items needed for the various activities and events and to look for opportunities to be generating further income in order to invest back to the members of the society. There have been a number of occasions where members have been absent from screenings, often on short notice, and so I have had to provide the equipment and host the evening. Next year I will be Secretary and Treasurer and I look forward to implement my organisational and team skills to continue the society and to improve the quality of it.

I am known as a very polite individual with a warm and friendly personality, and I enjoy assisting people in any way possible. Within a team I am hard working and very reliable and can use my initiative in appropriate situations. I enjoy research and organisational tasks and I enjoy seeing the organisation behind a project lead to a successful conclusion. I have a positive and cheerful personality and I bring an abundance of enthusiasm to any task. If there are any skills or abilities that I do not possess then I would enjoy learning them in order to fulfil the role to the best of my ability.

Written application statement by Alexandra Mills (final year undergraduate in Media and Cultural Studies)
Helping with the organisation of the Annual Conference of the British Forum for Ethnomusicology would be a very exciting opportunity. Since deciding to do a degree in Media and Cultural Studies I have found myself becoming more interested in events management and now have hopes to enter into that particular field for a future career. As I am taking the 3rd year work placement core module this would be a perfect opportunity to experience events management and also test my skills in this area.

Experience I have in organising events begins when I was elected to be head of social at my 6th form college where I organised charity events with the local fire station and primary schools which tested my communication skills and creative ideas. I put on regular parties for the 6th form students, most importantly due to the head teacher leaving, the last ever 6th form summer awards ball which has been tradition at the school for years. This event had an Oscar style awards show followed by a casino after-party where I came up with the idea of giving each student two chips to gamble with and the student with the most at the end of the night won a day out at Alton Towers. This event taught me to communicate with both teachers and teenage students about tickets and collecting money, along with the hotel staff where the ball was held and the companies which provided the entertainment.

I was allowed to stretch my creative ideas this summer when I organised a powerboat launch for my dad's speedboat company, Custom Powerboat Ltd. This involved sorting out a venue, guests from the UK and his abroad associates, for whom I had to sort out accommodation in a nearby hotel, flights and taxis. This was a brilliant opportunity for me as it tested my responsibility as an organiser as it was on a much bigger scale than the 6th form ball. I had to sort out moving the powerboat from the workshop to the venue, having people to work the various technology used on the night, such as lights, televisions and music. I had to bring in outside caterers, portable toilets, entertainment and a marquee company, and make sure this all ran smoothly.

I would love to help with the conference because I would like to broaden my skills and my CV. It will give me the chance to work with others and therefore my communication skills will be tested and it will help me learn about how other types of events are run and organised. The opportunity is one that I would benefit greatly from and take with me into a future career.

Those applicants who were not shortlisted for the interview provided only brief, information about their suitability for the post, or did not include concrete examples of their knowledge, skills and experience gained in previous work or study. One applicant included statements that showed a limited understanding of the nature of an academic event. Another candidate, whilst providing a range of interesting and relevant examples from previous work and voluntary experience, tended to draw more on his personality traits rather than his skills. Poor written English was also taken into account during the short-listing process. Below are three examples of written statements by students who were not shortlisted for the interview (ex. 2; note that grammatical and spelling errors are students' originals):

Example 2: Non-successful applicants' statements

Statement 1 (anonymous)
I feel I have to skills to be part of a team to help put this conference together. One factor which would aid the groups work, is my knowledge and ability to put things together well, and manage large groups of people. In my job at a well estiblished performance school, we have put on performances at theatres throughout the UK, including London's West End, and Liverpool Empire theatre. Also in my job as a waitress, I am very used to dealing with people any problems which they may have. All in all I feel I have a lot of qualities which may help, when arranging this conference.

Statement 2 (anonymous)
I am extremely excited at the possibilities of achieving this position. Extremely captivated by academics at LJMU, it is definitely an area I would like to pursue in the future. I hope to one day become an academic, and this seems to be vital experience that could add to my CV and give me the skills to help organise conferences in the future. I believe myself to be a very enthusiastic individual, proving to be a very vocal member of seminars keen express opinions. I am not shy when it comes to tackling new challenges or meeting new people. The annual conference for the British forum for Ethnomusicology seems to be an extremely intriguing event. It looks like an opportunity to expand my musical taste, already a keen music lover, I would love to learn a lot more about international musical practices and traditions. I believe I would make a very good conference assistant, with a pleasant manner and a determination to help out wherever I can. I volunteered to be student representative for single honours Media and Cultural studies, participation is very important to meas I want to get the best out of university life. I have already enjoyed modules with both Dr Sian Lincoln and Dr Simone Kruger and therefore expect the conference to be just as interesting and intriguing as those modules have been. I see the conference as a very exciting opportunity for LJMU and I would love to be a part of this special event.

Excerpts from statement (anonymous)
I see this event as a great opportunity full of experience and enjoyment. My aim in life is to be a broadcasting journalist and I find that my skills and abilities are great in these environments I certainly have the ability to work towards targets, with a team and me alone. If I have set targets then that's my main focus but cleverly covering it up with a friendly personality and a warming face. Im quick at thinking and with university coursework deadlines means I can produce positively with speed and even pressure. Im more than just the Irish guy. Ive got a huge personality that can mould alot of friendships…. I wasn't born to be a fantastic character, I made him and I'm still making my way through an exciting journey…. Im the motivated candidate for the job!!!!

Twelve shortlisted students were invited to a formal interview, which was conducted by a panel that consisted of both project leaders. The purpose of the interview and presentation was to ascertain students' level of initiative, independence and creative thinking, as well as their ability of working towards deadlines and schedules in pressured situations. Each interview lasted 15 minutes, consisting of a brief presentation (5 minutes maximum), followed by questions from the panel. Whilst students were allowed (but not required) to use presentation

materials (e.g. PowerPoint slides) to deliver their presentation, we asked them to focus their presentation on the following task:

> Considering the *specific duties* listed in the job description, select one/two duties and explain what you can contribute to that aspect of work. How would you approach this? How would you make your mark?

The subsequent question and answer session focused on the specific duties outlined in the presentation, as well as one of the following problems scenarios based on the conference. The scenarios were designed to assess students' ability to problem-solve, think quickly and be creative:

1. Conference website. What initiatives would you undertake to collect the information for the conference website (specifically on accommodation; about Liverpool; travel/parking)? What, for example, would you consider in terms of content for the website?

2. Preparing conference packs. Conference packs typically contain the conference programme and the abstracts of papers presented at the conference. What else would you include in the packs to make delegates feel welcome, comfortable and informed about both the conference and the city? How would that complement the website?

3. During the conference. Professor Yung Cha, a 65-year old Chinese ethnomusicologist turns up at the registration desk registering at the conference. You give him his pack and welcome him at the conference. However, Professor Cha has a big problem: he cannot find his accommodation and speaks very poor English. What do you do?

4. During the conference. Professor John Tomlinson, the keynote speaker is about to start delivering his keynote on Saturday morning. Suddenly, the technical equipment has stopped working, and Professor Tomlinson is getting quite angry. What would you do?

Two candidates were not successful in the interview for various reasons. For example, one student failed to prepare the presentation according to the aforementioned task whilst failing to explain how his knowledge, skills and experience would benefit specific duties as student conference assistant. Another candidate proposed to fulfil specific duties related to promotion and sponsorship, yet upon further discussion displayed little understanding in this area of expertise. The short-listing also accounted for logistical considerations, for example by considering all candidates' expertise and experience in different areas so as to be able to allocate different tasks to different candidates. Students were thus selected on the basis of their skills and experience in areas needed in preparation to the conference.

Whilst two students did not succeed with their application, ten undergraduate students were recruited via this formal application procedure for the post of "BFE 2009 Student Conference Assistant". These included: Rachel Dyer, Harriet Mould, Amy Smith, Ashley Turner, Marieke Jarvis, Catherine Davey, Aaron Horner, Alexandra Mills, Ashley Hopkins and Adele McClintock. These students showed an

ability to reflect upon how they might bring to bear existing work and academic experiences to this particular job, as would be the case in real life job applications. Yet students were required not only to focus upon their skill development, yet also to identify skill areas that needed further development during their placements.

The successful students signed a contract of employment, stipulating the responsibilities of the student assistants as well as our commitments towards them throughout the placements, and that payment of £350 may be refused if an assistant failed to complete work, and if he/she is unable to support the running of the event from 16 – 19 April 2009 (Appendix IV). This was to ensure that students experienced the full spectrum of organising and running a large-scale event, as well as that they provided support and assistance to the conference organiser during the event.

The various roles of 'BFE 2009 Student Conference Assistant'

Students' employment began with a first formal meeting between the assistants and project leaders in October 2008. During this meeting, clearly defined roles were allocated to pairs of student assistants besides the general duty to provide assistance during the conference, including room assistance, attending to general delegate queries, etc (see below). The reasons for task allocation were twofold: firstly, each successful applicant demonstrated particular skills during the application process that were deemed highly beneficial to the organising of a conference; secondly, and again mimicking 'real-life' work experiences, students had to work with other, unfamiliar students, and as part of a larger organising team led by Simone Krüger, the conference organiser. This allowed us to observe how both the smaller and larger team dynamic emerged as the project progressed. The assistants were teamed up and allocated specific duties as follows:

Rachel Dyer and Catherine Davey
- Contribute towards the writing of the conference website's content (taking photographs, writing text, etc)
- Catering during the event (tea/coffee)

Harriet Mould and Amy Smith
- Seek out potential sponsorship and income from advertising
- Prepare publicity, leaflets and other print materials
- Contribute towards compiling the conference packs

Ashley Turner and Aaron Horner
- Assist in the purchase of conference items, including pricing and booking enquiries (folders, bags, badges, USB pens, etc)
- Contribute towards compiling the conference packs
- Independently organise the recording of keynotes and plenary discussions, and upload these as podcasts on the conference website

Marieke Jarvis and Ashley Hopkins
- Compile a list of local artists for potential performances and entertainment during the conference, and enquire about booking fees and book performers
- Produce culture maps and events programme

Adele McClintock and Alexandra Mills
- Assist in the organising of conference facilities and catering
- Attend the registration desk while welcoming delegates and handing out conference packs

Whilst detailed guidance and sample work was provided by the conference organiser during group and individual meetings, the parameters of an academic conference (and, by its very nature, of many other culture-related events related to music) can be vague and uncertain, especially in the early stages of its organisation, only coming to fruition in the final weeks of event organisation. Indeed, we found that the 'not-quite-knowing' what the final event might look like was a significant issue that each conference assistant had to negotiate and overcome. For this reason, assistants were required to provide regular updates of their progress in relation to the above tasks during team meetings, which were captured in minutes taken by an assistant (Appendix V), whilst agreeing on new or continuing tasks with the conference organiser. Below is a list of dates when the update meetings were held with some indication of the purpose of the meeting. These became more frequent as the conference approached:

October 2008	During this first meeting, assistants met the conference organiser and each other, signed the contract, and gave their consent to participate in the research project. Assistants were paired up and assigned specific duties, whilst receiving guidance and sample materials from the conference organiser.
26 November 2008	First progress report meeting (minutes attached)
19 January 2009	Second progress report meeting (minutes attached)
2 March 2009	Third progress report meeting (minutes attached)
23 March 2009	Fourth progress report meeting (minutes attached)
7 April 2009	Preparatory meeting during which the assistants were shown the building/rooms and discussed best possible ways of arranging the space for the conference. The assistants also prepared (together with the conference organiser) a university risk assessment (app. II).
14 April 2009	170 conference packs were compiled, using the materials collected by students, such as delegate booklet, name badge, leaflets, USB stick, pen, writing pad, etc
15 April 2009	The rooms were prepared according to written plans by the conference organiser, e.g. presentation rooms, reception desk, book display, and refreshment area.

The process of minute taking during these update meetings had numerous advantages: firstly, it helped to set a formal framework for each meeting, as the minutes followed a standard format by capturing attendance, apologies, progress update by the conference organiser, general issues, progress report by assistants, future tasks, and next meeting date; secondly, it enabled the conference organiser to check on individual students' progress in relation to their allocated tasks and to discuss – together with all other conference assistants – possible solutions to problems and future actions, and thus to facilitate team work; and finally, to mimic real-life work scenarios. The minutes were circulated to all assistants after each meeting, thereby serving as a source of reference for all concerned.

It became apparent during the preparation stage that some assistants found it difficult to 'pinpoint' their progress, as their tasks were relatively open-ended and rarely prescriptive, requiring a certain degree of self-initiative and creativity. For example, some assistants responsible for assisting with events management, purchase of items, and bookings of facilities and catering commented on the ways in which their progress was hindered by uncertainties in regards to the budget, as bookings and purchases could not be made until the final weeks or even days prior to the event in April 09. These tasks thus required autonomous and independent work that was of *preparatory* nature. Typically, in work of this kind the defined goals were less specific, which meant that students had to learn as their roles evolved and as they became more familiar with the conference process. This also meant that tasks changed over time, and that the teams changed with new assistant pairs conducting new tasks.

Image 1**:** Compiling the conference packs prior to the event; (from l. to r.) Alex, Adele, Cat, Amy, Ashley, Harriet, Rachel, Simone and Marieke

Whilst students were given relative autonomy and freedom in completing the designated tasks so as to accommodate experiential and socially constructive learning, there were also some (albeit few) occasions when it was necessary for the conference organiser to intervene with the actions taken by some conference assistants. After all, this was a *real* academic conference hosted for a real organisation, and the conference organiser who was accountable to the organisation held overall responsibility for the conference to fulfil the expectations of the academic community. Some of these interventions are briefly explained below (Ex. 3). Students were thus obliged to channel any liaison with the outside world through the conference organiser who oversaw and maintained overall control of the conference planning. This also meant that (besides students) the conference organiser too sought out suitable venues, facilities, catering arrangements, costs for items, etc, and compared these with students' proposals. The final decisions in regards to bookings were always made by the conference organiser.

At the same time, we became increasingly aware that some students struggled with the workload required to complete certain tasks, as the majority of them were final year undergraduates, facing heavy workloads in completing research projects, assignments and a longitudinal dissertation, specifically during the final weeks of preparing the conference. For this reason, the project leaders sought to ensure that the WBL placements did not hamper students' academic achievements and allowed for certain tasks to be put on hold. Unfortunately in March 2009, Ashley Turner cancelled his placement as Student Conference Assistant due to heavy workloads in completing the final year of his undergraduate degree. (Nonetheless, Ashley participated in the final interview and completed a portfolio, so his voice will also feature in the final part of this report.) Ashley was replaced by another student (Dominic Bridge) during the running of the event.

Example 3: Scenarios of intervention in assistants' actions

Scenario 1
One assistant with the task of raising sponsorship from companies/organisations sent an inappropriate email to a local brewery without prior approval of the written communication by the conference organiser. All students were reminded that any written communication with internal and external persons had to be approved, as students' communication represented the university and the organisation to the outside world. A sample email was sent to the concerned student with the permission to use this in any subsequent communication.

Scenario 2
The assistants assigned with event management had the task to compile a list of possible world music groups/bands to perform during the conference. Nearer to the conference, it appeared that one of the students had agreed the booking with a particular group. In this instance, the conference organiser contacted the music group directly and withdrew permission from the students to liaise with any music groups/bands.

Scenario 3
A team of students responsible to collect specific data and information for the conference website (e.g. Travel, About Liverpool) uploaded this information without prior approval by the conference organiser. (The conference organiser trained the students in maintaining the website and provided the login details, so that students gained new skills and experience in IT.) However, the conference organiser deemed the uploaded information inappropriate for the academic audience that this website was aimed up and instantly deleted the information from the website. During a meeting with the concerned students, they were provided with more detailed instructions and sample material and required to submit the new text to the conference organiser before these sections of the website were finally uploaded.

Scenario 4
One assistant with the task of obtaining free USB sticks was successful in securing them via email, yet due to his absence during the Easter vacation, the conference organiser took initiative in fetching them.

Scenario 5
One of the assistants responsible for events management was assigned the task to make all necessary arrangements to pick up, deliver and set up technical equipment for the live performances on the Friday evening of the conference. However, the student was unable to complete this task due to personal reasons, so that another conference assistant was given responsibility (one day prior to the social event) to oversee the smooth running of the live performances. The conference organiser intervened insofar as to fetch the technical equipment a few days prior to the conference and store these in a safe place ready for use during the Friday evening social.

Scenario 6
Two assistants were assigned the new task of designing the name badges and front cover of the delegate handbook. Possible designs were discussed during the progress update meeting, e.g. an important feature of the name badges was to include colour-coded circles/squares to enable quick identification of delegates' individual bookings; consistency was another important feature. Yet the resultant samples prepared by the assistants were deemed unsuitable by the conference organiser who instead used her own designs for the name badges and delegate handbook.

Experiencing the conference

The 2009 Annual Conference of the British Forum for Ethnomusicology was held at LJMU's Dean Walters Building from 16 – 19 April 2009 . Here, we wished to allow all student assistants a certain degree of autonomy and freedom in assisting the organiser during the event, the reasons for which were twofold: firstly, we wanted to simulate a real-life working environment where students have to fulfil tasks independently, flexibly and creatively; secondly, it was practically impossible for the conference organiser to constantly supervise the work of all student assistants during the event whilst also looking after over 150 delegates. Yet at the same time, we agreed that a person was needed to act as a link between the assistants and organiser so as to ensure that necessary support and guidance was available to all students. A head assistant was thus elected in a democratic nomination process during which each assistant could forward two votes, and which resulted in Marieke Jarvis' nomination as head assistant.
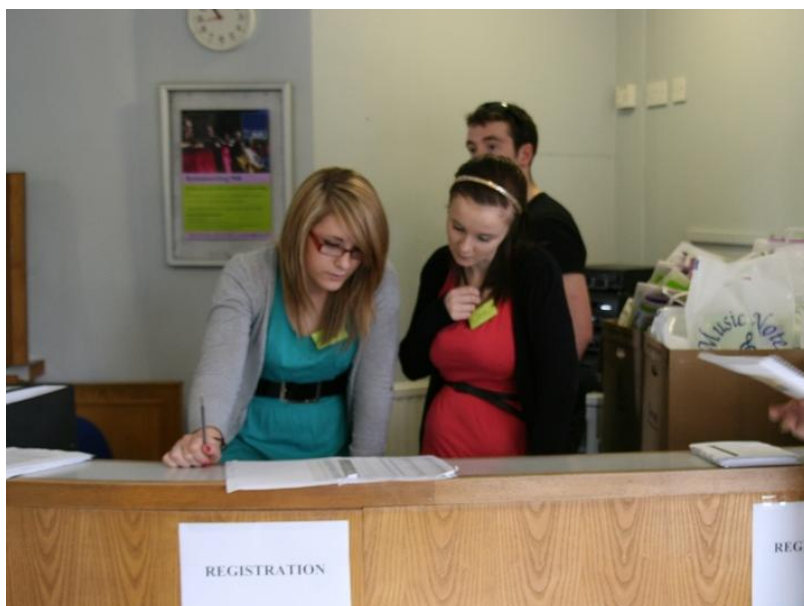
Image 2: Harriet and Amy at the registration desk (with Dominic in background)

All conference assistants started work at 9am on the first morning of the conference, as delegates began to arrive for registration from 10am onwards. It was imperative to make delegates feel welcome, so we agreed that after registration, the assistants would take turn to show them around the building, offer a drink in the refreshment area, help them log into the internet through our wifi facility, show the book stalls and social areas where they could meet other delegates. Throughout the conference, the student assistants were required to fulfil a range of other duties, which were divided into the following areas:

Attend the registration desk	Welcome delegates; check that registration details are correct in the database; hand out the delegate packs; answer delegates' queries; register interested delegates as members of the BFE organisation and collect membership fee.
Attend the refreshment area	Prepare cups of coffee/tea; provide water; ensure that urns contain hot water; clean up rubbish.
Attend the presentation rooms	Provide assistance in case of technical or other difficulties, e.g. locate technician or other staff member to help with problems; listen to the presentations.
Assist delegates with general queries	These varied, depending on delegates' needs.

Image 3: Rachel, Alex and Marieke in the refreshment area (l. to r.)

Image 4: Adele in the refreshment area

Two assistants responsible for events management were also required to provide technical help and general support during the social evening events, which included the following:

Thursday evening	Welcome reception and film night in the Anglican Cathedral
Friday evening	Live music in Hannah's Bar by two professional groups, followed by delegates' performances
Saturday evening	Conference dinner in the Adelphi Hotel with live music by Paprika Balkanicus, followed by delegates' performances and world beat disco

Image 5: Marieke announcing the programme during the conference dinner & party

The aim of the project leaders was for all assistants to have immersive experiences in almost all areas of running the conference, whilst avoiding that students spend too much time on one task only. We also wished to ensure that the students were completely aware of their roles on each day of the conference, so as to avoid that, let's say, the registration was unstaffed, or the water was cold in the refreshment area, or nobody was at hand to help with technical equipment, and the like. We also wished to facilitate team work and communication, thus the different tasks would have to be handled by at least two students. To this end, a rota system was devised that exactly specified (by date, time) the task of each student assistant (Appendix VI). The rota system facilitated the aforementioned objectives, as well as ensured that student teams changed throughout the conference, an experience of immense importance in a real-life working environment.

Image 6: Conference assistants listening to the plenary discussion (from l. to r.: Aaron, Cat, Adele, Alex and Marieke)

At the same time, the project leaders found it imperative that all student assistants had opportunities for the formation of subject-specific, disciplinary understandings and skills during the conference, or to participate in the social activities of the conference so as to network with delegates (many of whom were students too) and exchange music-related knowledge and ideas. After all, the majority of student assistants studied on a music degree completing extended research for a music dissertation, whilst those studying media and cultural studies had a keen interest in music. The rota task system thus also facilitated students' participation in paper panels, plenary discussions and keynote speeches, as well as the conference more widely.

Image 7: Student conference assistants during the conference dinner & party; from l. to r.: Aaron (centre), Ashley, Harriet, Dominic, Marieke, Szabina (photographer), Alex, Adele and Catherine

Developing Graduate Skills

In the literatures on work-based learning, it has been argued that 'important skills may be learnt or developed' (Fanthome 2004:3) as a result of a real work placement. More specifically, the work-based learning placements as student conference assistant enabled students to immerse themselves in a real-life working experience during the planning, organising and running of the Annual Conference of the British Forum for Ethnomusicology. We found that this experience facilitated students' development in three areas, 'generic' skills and abilities highly sought by potential employers.as proposed by Mantz Yorke (2004:4):

- *system-thinking* (seeing the part in the context of the wider whole)
- *experimentation* (intuitively or analytically)
- *collaboration* (communication and team-working)

Yorke argued that undergraduate programmes should be concerned with these areas, whilst proposing a further fourth category *abstraction* (theorising), although the latter category was less relevant in this specific context. Generally, it was envisioned that students developed a range of graduate skills surrounding the three aforementioned areas, as stipulated by our institution (see http://www.ljmu.ac.uk/BLW/114176.htm):

I. *Analysing and solving problems*: this was pivotal throughout the placements, as students had designated roles within which they were given relative freedom to make their own decisions to find solutions ot alternatives to a given situation.

II. *Team working and interpersonal skills*: this was integrated throughout the placements in two ways: first, by encouraging students to work in pairs and smaller groups during the preparation and update meetings; second, by rotating students' collaboration during the event. Interpersonal skills were also developed by students' engagement with academic staff and delegates.

III. *Verbal communication*: this was important between organizer and assistants, as well as when dealing with the public and delegates, which required careful listening and comprehension.

IV. *Written Communication*: this was required during all stages of the placements, including written application; note-taking and minuting; liaising with delegates via email and website; exchanging ideas with organizer and assistants via email.

V. *Personal planning and organizing*: this was encouraged by allowing students relative freedom and autonomy in conducting allocated tasks, both during the preparatory stage and during the event itself.

VI. *Initiative*: this was tested throughout the placements, and was shown by students' volunteering for certain tasks, including minute taking; database maintenance; website updates; etc. Initiative was specifically important during the actual event, as it involved students' willingness to support delegates with individual problems and issues.

VII. *Numerical reasoning*: this was enhanced by involving students in the purchase of items for inclusion in the packs; conference budget; and accepting membership applications at the registration desk, whilst handling payment in cash/card/cheque.

VIII. *Information literacy and ICT skills*: this was a crucial element for all assistants, whilst using email; word packages; excel spreadsheet; website builder, and other software. Email, in particular, enabled more immediate communication, which was also less affected by international time zone differences. The support with the website was also crucial, as it was the main source of information for delegates.

How students utilised, managed and negotiated these requirements will be the concern of the next section, which seeks to assess the extent to which the WBL experience impacted on students' employability.
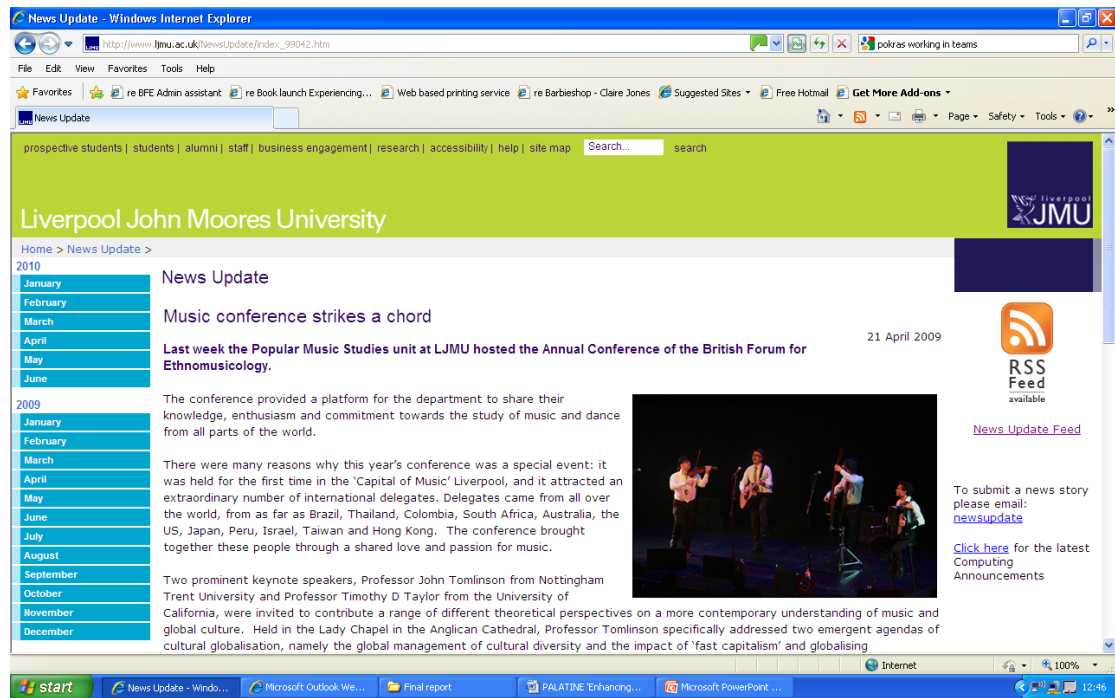
Image 8: News Item on LJMU website (source: http://www.ljmu.ac.uk/NewsUpdate/index_99042.htm)

PART III: The Student Experience of Work-Based Learning

Understanding the student experience

As highlighted, ethnography was employed as a means to gauge the 'real-life' experiences of the conference assistants in preparation for a major, 'real-life' event. By its very nature, ethnography is a highly flexible methodology that can be adapted according to the culture being observed. It allows the researcher to have highly flexible immersions into that culture, combined with personal interactions with participants. In *Example 3: Scenarios of intervention in assistants' actions* (p. 15-6), we demonstrated that our interactions were crucial, given that the assistants worked towards a major international conference, and there were times when the conference organiser had to intervene in their planning. Ethnographic encounters also allowed the project leaders to observe assistants' teamwork in four key ways: as part of a two-person team; across teams; as part of one large team; with the conference organiser; as well as autonomously. Through our observations, it was possible to ascertain how students' experiences developed, and the variety of factors that contributed to this.

Since assistants were paired up for specific tasks (according to their strengths and interests demonstrated in the application form and interview), the project leaders were able to observe the group on a 'micro' level. For example, each smaller team made regular contact (mostly via email, although sometimes through informal meetings) with the conference organiser on various issues, problems and achievements. Through these key interactions, we could observe aspects of problem-solving and team-working, as well as how the assistants became more confident and adept in their designated roles. Yet given the time-constraints of the research and other work commitments, it was not possible to spend time with the groups outside of the university environment. For example, the ethnographic approach could have been enhanced by accompanying students whilst visiting potential entertainment locations (Ashley and Marieke), or whilst liaising with potential sponsors (Harriet and Amy).

The ethnographic approach allowed us to combine participant-observations with interviews at various stages of the project. We also used students' work-based learning portfolios to provide further data at the end of the project. Observations were mostly conducted during regular group meetings and the conference itself. There was no need for initial icebreaking, as we knew all students prior to the project, and so had an existing (albeit professional) relationship with them. The project leaders and assistants usually met monthly (with conference updates being circulated via email), with more frequent meetings towards the event.

Our ethnographic observations enabled us to note that to some assistants, the team meetings (intended as an opportunity to exchange issues, problems and progression, as well as updates on the conference) had a somewhat formal, official feel than other group situations.

> Even though the meetings were really informal, I don't know whether it is because I have never really had that many board meeting type things before, but, I don't know…. I think if we had gone and done some sort of activity together we would have found it easier to get involved with everyone. (Ashley, p.c.)

The group meetings lacked the dynamic feel of the conference itself, which were necessarily structured and chaired by the conference organiser, as well as minuted by a different conference assistant (see appendix V). For Rachel, this proved very useful in relation to the conference itself:

> Being aware of what every persons task is, updates from you guys lets us know what's happening more, yeah having the knowledge behind all the events that was going on, and knowing what stages, where different tasks were at, if anything needed to be helped with you could sort of step in, or just being able to know all different areas, so knowing that there was sponsorship coming in, knowing that there will be stores for refreshments, and yeah it's good to know, and sort of be involved, knowing some people had specific jobs to do, knowing how it was fitting into the greater whole of the conference, it was good. And when the conference was going on, being able to answer the questions and know the information they would want to know, be able to comfortably be able to know or tell them what was going on. (Rachel, p.c.)

However, there was indeed a certain element of pressure for the assistants in this environment, as they had to illustrate how they had contributed to the group and were working as part of the team, and further, how their contributions were feeding into the overall success of the conference. On the contrary, during the conference itself we observed an excellent mix of both autonomous action and teamwork, so that this sense of 'formality' no longer pertained amongst the assistants. They now worked as a professional and experienced team within which a wonderful dynamic was evident. More opportunities for informal teamwork may thus have been beneficial for the group dynamics, specifically during the preparatory stage of the event.

One of the key observations made during group meetings emerged from changes in assistants' understanding of the nature of an academic conference. As they became more involved in the project, they also became more familiar with their roles and with each other. They began to understand more fully what the organisation of a conference entailed, as Adele demonstrates:

> SK: So the event itself helped you to see a little bit more clearly but perhaps you would do it differently next time?
> AM: oh definitely, I think once the conference unfolded we realized how you obviously had a very clear vision, or a much clearer vision of what was going to happen and we just kind of wished we could have seen it that way beforehand but... (Adele, p.c.)

Similarly, Marieke notes that:

> It was… hard for us to really realise what usually happens at a conference… [especially] what kind of music or standard of music that they would expect. Now, in hindsight, we definitely would have worked differently. (Marieke, p.c.)

Clearly, ethnography helped to gain a more nuanced, longer-term understanding of students' experiences during their work-based learning placements. The organic nature of the event lent itself particularly well to ethnographic methodologies. Observation and interviewing allowed us to capture students' learning and

understanding over the seven-month period of planning and organising the conference. At every step of the way (including securing keynote speakers, accepting papers, mapping out panels, knowing how many people will attend, etc), the assistants became increasingly confident in their roles, whilst proposing increasingly innovative (although not always suitable) ideas and suggestions for the event. During the event itself, their interactions with others (including delegates) were spontaneous, responsive and autonomous, and we observed how their confidence had grown both as part of a team and on a personal level. This became particularly apparent during the ethnographic interviews, which generated rich responses and 'thick' insights into the student learning experience (see also methodology, page 5-6 for an interview outline). A final comment by Cat illustrates this well:

> I felt like over the year…I've learnt more about myself and that I can do things such as leading a group and having control over situations. I am more confident about doing it. There were more age ranges, people were 40 year older than us and I felt it was really interesting and to be able to deal with people from different age groups and feel respected by them. (Cat, p.c)

Applying for the post: students' motivations

In assessments of student employability, it is paramount to understand students' motivations for undertaking work-based learning. Whilst it could be argued that these arose from the paid or compulsory nature of WBL at LJMU, none of the student assistants explicitly mentioned such more pragmatic reasons. Indeed, only Ashley T. mentioned the payment of £350 as an incentive, whilst he discontinued the placement prior to the conference. Meanwhile, Harriet explained that the payment was a reason why a lot of students wanted initially to apply for the post but did not proceed due to the high workload and commitment that became apparent from the application pack. Therefore, only a dozen or so students applied, and these students apparently had other motivations than just finances that attracted them to the post. She further explained that:

> The main thing is that it wasn't mandatory; we had the choice of whether we had to do it or not. I suppose that everyone there has some sort of passion about some aspect of [the conference], whether it was music, or the event side of things, or the organising side of things…. Everyone was there because they wanted to be, and I think that definitely made people work a lot harder…. I don't know whether some people did it because they were getting paid, I don't know, because it was quite a nice incentive, but I definitely think it was because we had the choice…. You had to work hard to get the place…. I think there were people who were simply just interested in not having to do a sit-down module and who were just interested in getting paid at the end of it…. People said they want to [do the placement], and when they found out that they had to go through an interview process, they went 'o, I can't be bothered'…. When we first got told about it, I saw it as being very informal… but when we were sent all this information, I realised that it is a proper event, a serious event, and… people on my course were like 'I can't be bothered; it's too much effort', and I thought if you are going to have that sort of attitude, then you are not the sort of person for it anyway. (Harriet, p.c.)

Thus, the complexity of the application pack functioned as an effective gatekeeper in enticing those students who were serious about the placement and work experience,

as well as the success of the event itself. Those who did apply also admitted that they valued the relative safety that this placement provided, as it 'was structured [due to] working with lecturers at the uni' (Aaron, p.c.) or because the student 'wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my degree' (Amy, p.c.). More significantly, however, two dominant views emerged amongst the successful candidates, namely the desire to engage in more *practical, real* work experience, and to acquire *different, new* knowledge.

Firstly, students often articulated a dichotomy between academia and work, theory and praxis. WBL meant to move away from purely theoretical and towards practical experience, and thereby 'to be part of something real' (Harriet, p.c), a concern echoed by a range of students:

> I felt for the first time we had something real outside of our work to get involved with… and it felt like something really worthwhile. (Ashley H., p.c.)

> I thought it would be a great opportunity to get… real work experience to… test the skills I had so far, to see what ones I could develop during the conference. (Rachel, p.c.)

> What I am doing at the moment [academic study], a lot of it is less practical. (Harriet, p.c.)

To students, academia led to the acquisition of artificial and abstract knowledge, whereas WBL enabled them to gain applied, useful experience. This dichotomy clearly underlines the significance and usefulness of WBL in higher education, which is such pertinent theme that it will be further discussed in subsequent sections.

The WBL placement also resembled a *new* experience to students, specifically in terms of events management, as well as academically:

> I've never done anything like conference organising or event planning, so I thought it would just be a new experience and something I could learn from. (Ashley T., p.c.) It seemed that the conference would provide a valuable opportunity to look at music from different perspectives and might even shed light on music which people had never heard before. (Ashley T., PDP reflections submitted for MCAPM3005, April 2009)

> The fact of being involved in the actual start-up of such an event… was very interesting to me, as well as experiencing a conference for the first time [and] to fully experience it from beginning to end. I am interested in events management [but] we hadn't really covered much management as such…. (Marieke, p.c.)

> Arts administration and events management… was an area of work I had previously never considered and therefore had no experience in, which inspired me to apply in order to extend and acquire new skills. (Aaron, PDP reflection submitted for MCAPM3005, April 2009)

> I was thinking along the lines… of event work to do with music…. Not only doing customer service work during the actual event itself, but also the planning stages and management and development up towards it. (Rachel, p.c.)

> I just thought to find it a new experience…. I found something that I was really interested in…. I actually wanted to do this. It was a great experience because I'd never been to a conference. (Cat, p.c.) The opportunity of working within an environment that was new to me and [relevant] to my course of study was of great interest. (Cat, PDP reflections submitted for MCAPM3005, April 2009)

> To work in events, you don't need to have an events degree… so it was a great opportunity to have had that experience. (Amy, p.c.)

The particular nature of the placement also meant that students could meet 'people from different cultures' (Harriet, p.c.), thus promising unique social opportunities. At the same time, most students 'have never really come across ethnomusicology before' (Ashley H., p.c.), or 'never heard music from different countries' (Ashley T., p.c.), resembling intriguing reasons to apply for the assistant post. To Ashley, the placement also resembled a certain prestige or status:

> It did seem like a well-respected event and… people… come from quite prestigious universities… around the world, so it seemed like a good placement…. That's why I thought it would be good to do. (Ashley T., p.c.)

The formal application: inhibiting opportunities?

To many students, the application process appeared complex, yet also realistic and real. Aaron, for instance, remembered that 'when I worked at Selfridge's a few years ago, they did a similar thing' (Aaron, p.c.), and Harriet felt that the application experience would equip her well for gaining future employment:

> It has kind of made me more aware of the sort of processes we all are going to have to go through when gaining a job. (Harriet, p.c.)

Many students valued that the application pack provided clear and comprehensive (yet also off-putting, see earlier comments) information about the WBL role, which gave students 'an idea of what we were expected to do, so we had clear aims and objectives' (Aaron, p.c.). The first step involved the completion of an application form that was modelled on the LJMU template. This required students to complete personal details as well as to be critically self-reflexive by 'thinking about the skills and experiences you had [and] how you would fit into the job' (Rachel, p.c.).

During the subsequent interview, students delivered a short presentation, whilst outlining their suitability for two specific duties. Students appeared well-prepared, as they 'wrote a few ideas down… [also] thinking about what possible questions to answer… [and] matching my skills with… what I am capable of' (Aaron, p.c.), or 'I'd do a script for the presentation' (Cat, p.c.). Students were also provided with a simulated problem-based scenario. Adele, for instance, had to respond to the following problem:

> <u>During the conference</u>. Professor Yung Cha, a 65-year old Chinese ethnomusicologist turns up at the registration desk registering at the conference. You give him his pack and welcome him at the conference. However, Professor Cha has a big problem: he cannot find his accommodation and speaks very poor English. What do you do?

Adele provided an interesting answer, suggesting that she would speak loudly and clearly, and even walk the delegate to his accommodation. Interestingly to note here is that the scenario led to some anxiety during the event itself, as Adele 'was a bit worried in case I didn't understand them [delegates]' (p.c.), explaining further that:

> When you did the interviews and you said that Mr such and such has come from wherever, and he is really angry, I thought I am going to get one like that. He won't speak a word of English, and he will just be shouting at me. I was thinking 'what if someone can't speak English and they are agitated with me because I cannot speak their language?'. (Adele, p.c.)

This second interview stage was thus perhaps the most nerve-wrecking, reflected in the following comments:

> I was absolutely petrified when I did the interview with the presentation because that was the first time…. I have heard of it [and] am so grateful that I did it because obviously when I graduate… I'm going to need that sort of experience…. I am glad [about this process] rather than it being an easy way to 'get in'…. I needed to sell myself because… there were quite a few students who wanted a place, and it did make me quite nervous. (Harriet, p.c.)

> Interviews… are always nerve-wrecking, but they get a little easier if you prepare for them. But you don't know what they are going to ask you. (Aaron, p.c.)

> When we had the interview… it did feel a lot more formal than anything else I have done, and although I was nervous, at least I know what to expect… because if I hadn't have done that… I will be less scared next time…. I just feel a lot more comfortable…. But with the interview process, as soon as we were told, powerpoint, interview, I was like 'O right, this is actually serious'. (Harriet, p.c.)

Students focused specifically on their strengths, like Ashley H. who 'chose to focus on the live performances, the entertainment for people in the evenings' (Ashley H., p.c.), yet did not present *potential* areas for development. There was thus an unfortunate clash in interest between employer and learner: whilst students were ambitious to succeed in the interview, so showcased their best and most developed skills, they did not emphasise a desire to develop and improve in other, less experienced areas (and potentially risk the appointment to the post). This in turn meant that students were allocated tasks that best suited their capabilities, rather than developing new experience and knowledge. Rachel explained that:

> I picked tasks that I knew I would be good for, but I think what I didn't justify so much was perhaps how I wanted to try and develop other things, for example organising performances or sponsorship. Those are the areas I hadn't had experience in, so perhaps I would have liked to have experienced it. (Rachel, p.c.)

To build upon existing skills and knowledge was indeed desirable from the employer perspective (due to a reduction in time and risk) but was in *some* cases not advantageous for students' learning and development. For instance, Ashley T. and

Aaron were required to collect information on stationery prices, a task that, to some students, appeared rather daunting and uninteresting:

> I might have been good at writing the website… [so] I was miffed…. But I thought that's obviously what you [conference organiser] felt was best…. I was mostly in charge of collecting information…. I didn't mind doing it, but yeah, it wasn't… fun. (Ashley T., p.c.)

> I could not have done Ashley or Aaron's job. I would have had a breakdown looking at the plastic wallets and bags and stuff for six months. (Adele, p.c.)

On the other hand, Aaron also admitted that whilst 'it seemed daunting at first… I think like Marieke and Ashley…organising the bands, I would not have been able to do that…. Even with the website…that is not my thing at all!' (Aaron, p.c.) This was echoed by Amy, saying that 'I would have been worried about organising the bands and entertainment in the evening' (Amy, p.c.). Thus in these instances, the interview enabled the project leaders to match students' interest with suitable, positive learning opportunities:

> I think doing sponsorship definitely gave me a lot more skills than if I was to… go round venues and bands and stuff... because I think I already, not knew how to do it… but I did think it is [something] that I have done in the past, so this kind of opened up a new arena. (Harriet, p.c.)

> Yeah, I was really happy with that role, and it was nice to meet Marieke as well. (Ashley H., p.c.)

> I enjoyed it…. At the time, I would have done any task, as I was helping. (Cat, p.c.)

Generally, students commented positively on the impact of the formal application process on their real-life work experience, concluding that 'I'm going to need that sort of experience… in the future' (Harriet, p.c.), and 'thinking what you are capable of, yes, it is useful for the future, definitely!' (Aaron, p.c.). This first step in the WBL process is thus crucial for students to gain first-hand experience with the requirements of recruitment in the *real* world of work where *capability* – rather than potential – determines success.

How did the students manage and negotiate their work-based learning role? To what extent did they rely on instruction and direction from the project leaders (e.g. employers)? Or, did they achieve autonomy, thereby taking ownership over their work? These are intriguing questions in discussions on student employability. Clearly, ethnographic research can shed some light on such concerns and bring a more nuanced understanding of students' work-based learning experience. In the following sections, we will illustrate the scope and nature of students' work-based learning, which revolve around three pertinent themes: ambiguity (theme I); team work (theme II); commitment and initiative (theme III). Subsequently, we will illustrate how students learnt from their WBL experiences through critical self-reflection. Following on from these discussions, the final part will then derive conclusions on the value of work-based learning.

Theme I: Coping with ambiguity and uncertainty

> At the start, I didn't think we would be doing all the preparation ourselves…. At the very first meeting, we were all asking how we are going to do this…. [Only later] would we be aware of what we were supposed to do and… what was asked of us. I did become more confident in myself and what I was supposed to do because I started to get more involved. (Adele, p.c.)

Opening this section, Adele comments on the confusion and ambivalence felt specifically during the early stages of organising the event, during which the assistants were allocated specific duties (in student pairs), a state of confusion that became clearer only at the later stages of students' involvement. Only in one or two instances did students feel that 'as soon as I got going and realising what my role was and that I could that, I found it really easy' (Amy, p.c.). Thus during the early phase, most students' perceptions were marked by strong feelings of ambiguity, as none of them had ever experienced an academic event before, and only one or two students had previous experience of event management, which is reflected in a range of students' responses:

> When we were organising, I found it hard to realise what it [conference] would be like, so it was hard to get a sense. I was a bit nervous…. (Aaron, p.c.)

> At times, we were slightly confused about which direction we were going and it was hard to perceive how the event was going to unfold. We had a rough idea, but we didn't have any clue as to how accurate our perception was. (Ashley, p.c.)

> It was all new because I had never done anything like it before…. I have never done all this, like writing the booklet… working with different people [who] all had different experiences…. It was a little overwhelming. (Adele, p.c.)

> At the beginning, it was a bit daunting… and I sat there thinking how ten of us… are going to do this, like organising everything. (Amy, p.c.)

> At the very beginning, I had absolutely no idea… I was completely new to the whole thing. As the months went by, obviously there was more of a structure… but during the actual event it was a lot different. (Harriet, p.c.)

The event thus appeared abstract to students. This ambivalence or not knowing meant, at times, confusion as to what was required of them in completing their tasks during the preparatory stage. Aaron, who was in charge of collecting information on conference items, reflected that:

> I underestimated by a lot…. When I knew the budget, it was a bit easier [to] imagine, four days, how many people would drink tea and how often. It wasn't very easy to do. (Aaron, p.c.).

Meanwhile, Ashley and Marieke who were in charge of supporting the organiser in events management, found it difficult to gauge potential artists' interest and availability to perform at the event without a clear idea of the budget. This resulted in significant uncertainty as to whom to approach, and how to negotiate such arrangements, which had to be subject to final agreement by the conference organiser:

> That was definitely difficult because… we didn't know what we were going to be able to offer people for quite a long time…. We didn't really know who we could aim at and what kind of… professionals we could aim for. (Ashley, p.c.)

> The fact that the budget was so late, that did keep us undecided for a while…. Most bands that we contacted within the local Western scene were very keen…. The first thing that I said was that the budget was very low and we can't know until January…. As the process went on, it was frustrating not being able to [confirm]. (Marieke, p.c.)

Students also had to cope with ambiguity as their tasks frequently shifted during the preparatory stage, as in Adele's example, who, in providing website support, had positive and rewarding learning experiences, specifically in terms of technology:

> As I got involved in that [website], I was glad because I am a technophobe, so I learnt a little about that…. I did enjoy writing for that website because it was something I had never done before. As I mentioned, I am terrible with technology…. I was really pleased with myself that I got to do something like that…. I wouldn't have volunteered for it, but I'm glad that you [conference organiser] put me forward for it. (Adele, p.c.)

Ambiguity also played a key role in students' experience during the conference. Marieke, for instance, explained that 'I understood that nothing can go by schedule for every single day' (p.c.). Reflecting on the Friday and Saturday evening performances, Marieke remembered how she coped with uncertainty and ambiguity so as to successfully manage the smooth running of both evenings:

> On Friday night, it was quite chaotic. The room was full of people [eating] when we arrived. There was a slight panic… but I have learnt to just ask straight for the manager [which] I wouldn't have done before. Now I understand to go straight to the top…. Also, I had only received the sheet with who was playing shortly before, so I learnt to improvise a lot…. I didn't know what they [delegate performers] looked like…. That was a little problem also on the Saturday night; I simply didn't know who they were…. With the main band, we picked them up from the station…. Once I had figured out on Saturday night who was who, I just kept letting them know 'you are playing in 10 minutes', especially the guy who was really nervous. I calmed him down a bit…. I just kept reassuring him that he would be on in 10 minutes, and he would be fine. (Marieke, p.c.)

Meanwhile, Rachel remembered incidences at the registration desk that posed some challenges and required flexibility and problem-solving:

> Sometimes there'd be enquiries… when you didn't quite know how to deal with it…. So it was just a case of… writing up enquiries and make sure that was resolved [later]…. We always made sure that we'd contact each other… to make sure it got resolved. (Rachel, p.c.)

Thus, ambiguity played a pivotal role in students' WBL experiences, as it required from them a high level of problem-solving skills, through which they learnt to be flexible, creative and adaptable. One final anecdote from Aaron's experience will exemplify how he coped with uncertainty – and successfully managed a new situation – during the conference:

Whilst sitting through panels I would usually present myself to the presenting delegates 10 minutes before their presentation. This allowed time to set up the projection board or address any computer problems. By being present in the panels before the presentations took place allowed time for problem solving. An example of this would be on the Saturday of the conference in room 006 where a delegate was having problems with the musical content in his PowerPoint presentation. Although it was literally impossible to play the music as he had wished, I managed to offer a solution and alternative, which meant I would personally select the tracks from the CD and play them through the CD player at the right time. This worked just as well and the delegate was very pleased his presentation had not suffered. The solution to the problem was not to spend time focussing on the specific problem, but to find a suitable alternative, especially when time is of the essence. Due to the impracticality of playing this particular music through PowerPoint I had to think of another way of overcoming the problem in a short space of time and with many other delegates' presentations already prepared. Essentially I applied a problem solving technique outlined as 'identify, assess and take action' (Bennis et al. 2005:278). (Aaron, PDP reflection submitted for MCAPM3005, April 2009)

Theme II: The role of team work

In any workplace, members of a team 'must co-operate in order for work to be carried out' (Mullins 2007:299). Thus, team work was heavily built into this project so as to enhance students' graduate skills and, thus, employability. It was envisioned that team work would further students' inter-personal skills and social attributes, used to communicate with and relate well to others. The project leaders sought to promote team work in two ways, namely by a) pairing students at the beginning of the placement prior to the event (see pp. 12-13) and running regular update meetings; and b) grouping students randomly for various tasks during the event (see rota system, appendix VI). However, it was found that the nature of the team work was different during and prior to the event. Prior to the event, students felt that their work was more individualistic, perhaps combined with occasional meetings between both students. Indeed, there were only few (or even no) opportunities for truly *social* constructivist learning. Various students explained that:

We'd [Marieke and Ashley] kind of get together after we did our research [into potential performances and venues] and then evaluate and discuss it. We rarely went out together. It was more individual work. (Marieke, p.c.)

I was struggling to find time to meet up with Aaron [and] we might not see each other for a week or so…. It's difficult to say everything you need to say over texts [SMS] or facebook. (Ashley T., p.c.)

Initially I think I knew it [the task of uploading information on the website] was going to be difficult…. That's why we split up the task, so that she [Cat] would be in charge of travel… and I would do the accommodation, but we'd still keep in contact and meet up when we needed. (Rachel, p.c.)

To begin with, when we [Amy and Harriet] were seeking sponsorship and you [organiser] gave us a big list of publishers, we literally split it in half… and went off and did it separately. Then we got together and made a massive list of local music companies, all restaurants, … art galleries [etc] to see if we could get any

> sort of freebies or any more sponsorship for the event, and then we split that in
> half and did it separately again. (Harriet, p.c.)

Thus, during the preparatory stage, most student pairs split the workload and completed the tasks individually, rather than through joint efforts, which had both advantages and disadvantages, both for students' skill development and the tasks at hand. For instance, some students like Aaron and Ashley T. were 'setting ourselves deadlines [which] helped the specific tasks seem more manageable' (Aaron, PDP reflection submitted for MCAPM3005, April 2009). Such goal-setting between the students essentially resulted in effective planning (sf. Zeigler 2008). Harriet, meanwhile, explained the difficulty of splitting the emailing task as it led to confusion:

> That ended up being quite problematic, because Amy was receiving emails from
> some companies, and I was receiving emails from other companies, and we
> didn't know, because some were on her email address and some were on mine.
> So maybe, if we… did it again, we would perhaps do it with just one email
> address, rather than split it between the two. (Harriet, p.c.)

Within some student pairs, there even existed some tension and disagreement, as some students felt they had made a greater effort. In other instances, there was tension between student pairs due to a lack of communication or even personality clash:

> The negatives were that obviously you are two individuals and you have
> different ideas, fist of all…. It was difficult in that I personally do not feel that
> he/she was doing the same amount of work or research that I did, or he/she
> would be pushing… in one direction, whereas I would have to pull him/her
> back, so it was very much a struggle. (anonymous, p.c.)

> During the process of organising, Aaron and Ashley T. were compiling the
> information for the packs, and me and Harriet tried to get in touch with them,
> and they weren't giving us feedback at all…. [Perhaps we should have
> established a forum where we can establish contact?] Yeah, definitely with the
> [task compiling] the information packs, it would have been better for everybody
> to talk together. (Amy, p.c.)

> This, however, is where I encountered problems… as the role… created personal
> problems… [which] proved a challenge due to the partner I was allocated. The
> problems [surrounded] personality… as the person in question had what could
> be seen as a different way of working and this… hindered my true potential…. I
> almost felt intimidated and this led me to the loss of focus in relation to the tasks
> given. (anonymous, p.c.)

The comments show that the social working environment determined some students' attitude, as 'different work situations may also influence the individual's orientation to work' (Mullins *et al*. 2007:10). In the latter example, the student sought alternative tasks in discussion with the conference organiser so as to work within other groups of students, explaining that:

> I therefore took on a more fluid role often going between the different members
> of the group, working within a team of changing members depending on the
> task. (anonymous, p.c.)

Meanwhile, other students also worked very effectively within their pairs, reflected in the following comments:

> Adele worked very well with me. We kept in touch for about an hour via emails. (Marieke, p.c.)

> I was glad that I was put with Aaron… [because] we got on. (Ashley T., p.c.)

> We always worked together [and] off each other. What one of us can do, the other can't, so it helps a lot…. We would always ask each other for help so we can rely on each other. (Amy, p.c.)

> Me and Amy do complement each other when we work together… and I think if I had worked with someone who hadn't pulled their weight as much, it could have caused quite a few problems. (Harriet, p.c.)

In some instances, students felt that paired teamwork provided some kind of safety net in difficult situations. Marieke reflected that 'overall, it was nice to have a partner in crime' (p.c.). Thus, the allocation of tasks in pairs revealed to be an interesting challenge, as well as positive experience to students.

<u>Lack of whole-team experiences during preparation</u>

As already mentioned, the splitting of tasks between student pairs was little facilitative of building whole-team experiences. Indeed, the lack of opportunities for social interaction amongst all student assistants meant insufficient team building:

> We did feel like we were… almost separated a little bit, and we weren't working as a team…. I suppose it would have been good to mingle with everyone else because we didn't know them…. I didn't actually see any of that [assistants' skills] up until the actual event, because we were all working on separate things. (Harriet, p.c.)

> I would have felt better if I had known… other people. I thought it was just me… in the meeting… [who] under-performed in comparison to [other assistants]…. Because not everyone knows each other, it was a little bit awkward…. It takes a bit before people can relax with each other and open up. I think that's when the best work will happen. (Ashley T., p.c.)

It was particular students who already knew each other, like Cat, Adele, Aaron, Marieke and Rachel (all were year 3 PMS students), or Harriet and Amy (year 2 MCS students), as Cat explained:

> Yeah, there was at first [a divide]. Alex, Ashley, Amy and Harriet… we didn't know that well…. We were pretty much strangers when we first got together….I didn't really talk to them that much until we started working on the conference. (Cat, p.c.)

Those students already familiar with each other also kept in touch via facebook or mobile phone. Cat, again, remembered that: 'It wasn't really difficult… because we are all quite close anyway and we worked together [beforehand]…. [How did you

keep in touch?] Usually over facebook, I think, with everyone except Ashley [2nd year PMS student], or through texting…. We used email during the beginning… but then we used facebook, or we texted each other and met up sometimes.' (Cat, p.c.) Thus, more effective interaction between the whole team may have been facilitated by opportunities for informal interactions, using, for instance, Facebook as the social networking site.

Ashley further explained his self-doubts in his own performance, combined with the feeling that 'others did a really good job', which made him feel under pressure and worried 'if I'm doing things right' (Ashley T., p.c.). Such self-doubts did impact on students' confidence in going ahead (or not) and accomplishing the task allocated to them. It is likely to be this reason (amongst others, such as pressures to complete academic work)[1] that Ashley discontinued his placement, explaining that 'if I was to quit, it wouldn't make much difference' (*ibid.*), which clearly reflects Ashley's lack of self-belief in having a role and place in the team.

The value of update meetings and minutes

> In the meetings that we had, we were able to meet and discuss where everyone was getting up to, what problems they've had, what issues they've had. (Harriet, p.c.)

The update meetings were often described as board meetings, which enabled students to better understand what was required of them, as 'at the beginning, there were a couple of things that me and Amy got confused about… but the meetings… did help' (Harriet, p.c.). Particularly useful were the minutes (appendix V), which were taken by different students at different occasions. Rachel and Aaron, for instance, commented that:

> The minutes become a vital part of the conference as they would become a record and a marker for the progress made and to identify actions to be followed up at the next meeting. Therefore it was important not only to give the highest level of detail in its most simple form but also to establish a format for other minute write-ups. (Rachel, PDP reflection submitted for MCAPM3005, April 2009)

> I did my utmost to attend meetings, although I did miss two of them, one occasion due to illness…. I found the minutes that were taken in the meetings to be extremely useful as they kept me up to date with the team and provided me with specific details and tasks for the next meeting. The minutes and progress updates are essential in the planning of a conference in this particular area of events management (Appleby 2002). (Aaron, PDP reflection submitted for MCAPM3005, April 2009)

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[1] During our conversation, Ashley did emphasise that one major factor for discontinuing the placement was the heavy workload, specifically during the final year of his undergraduate degree, and explained that the placement may better be placed in the second year when the marks do not count as heavily towards the final degree result. With the academic pressures, Ashley 'was worried it was going to affect [his] work…. The third year is the most crucial year, so I was worried it might have a detrimental effect on some of the other work.' (Ashley T., p.c.)

The update meetings also provided some (albeit limited) opportunities 'to get involved with everyone' (Ashley, p.c.). To some students, the update meetings were useful for developing more whole-team experiences, even though there was still a sense of formality felt amongst students:

> Certainly, as the meetings got more regular, and we started seeking everyone more… everybody ended up being more interlinked…. But even though we had been in meetings together, I hadn't actually introduced myself properly, and I didn't really know them…. I hadn't really socialised with or really got into in-depth conversations with them. (Harriet, p.c.)

Nonetheless, the meetings did enable students to 'become aware of what every person's task is [and] to know about all different areas…, knowing how it was fitting into the greater whole of the conference' (Rachel, p.c.). The awareness of peers' tasks was particularly useful during the conference, as Rachel was 'comfortably able to tell delegates what was going on' (*ibid.*). At the same time, awareness of how the other assistants accomplished their tasks led to a positive degree of peer pressure and encouragement amongst some students:

> The main thing was seeing how everyone else worked like Harriet, Ashley and Amy…. They are all second years, and they are all doing work that made me think 'god, I have got to step up a bit here'…. Cat and Rachel are very clever… and Marieke was just as good…. Knowing what they were capable of and seeing what they could do made me aware of what I could do…. I have become more aware of what I can do…. If it was just me working on my own, I think, I would have gone about it in my own way, but looking at how everyone else did it… (Adele, p.c.)

Clearly, reflecting on the other students' accomplishments helped Adele better to understand her own abilities or areas for further development. Similarly, Amy recognised her strengths as well as potential new skills by learning about all facets and aspects of the conference organisation during the update meetings:

> [What did you think you learnt?] I think… what actually goes into events and how much there is to cover. It has really benefited me because it has helped me… improve my skills and organising, but also how many different areas I can improve on… [for instance] the music side, getting acts together [a task completed by Ashley and Marieke]…. It has helped me realise how you can look into venues, costs, equipment, and so on. (Amy, p.c.)

Team work during the event

During the event, students were more actively involved in negotiating their social role within the team as a whole because there were more frequent opportunities to work with others. Amy explained that 'once we got to know everybody, it was a lot easier. We realised we could talk to everybody if we needed help, and they offered us advice.' (p.c.), a claim echoed by Harriet who felt that 'with regards to learning from other people, that definitely only happened within the actual event!' (Harriet, p.c.).

The team work during the event was particularly effective since 'the group was strong enough in communication to be able to deal with problems' (Rachel, p.c.). *Communication* was thus crucial for the success of the teamwork. Students managed particularly well to keep each other updated of new insights: 'If we learnt about something, a particular issue, then we'd make sure that… I told, you know, the next people in reception.' (Rachel, p.c.) Cat, for instance, joint the registration desk on Friday, remembering that 'Adele had been doing it [registration] for an hour beforehand, so she showed me what to do' (Cat, p.c.).

The value of team work is clear, as effective working relationships develop when team members listen respectfully and support each other, maintain confidentiality, avoid negative judgments, and have opportunities for shared enjoyment and laughter. Thus whilst students' WBL was rooted in constructivist learning throughout the placement, their learning became increasingly *social* as the event unfolded. Familiarity and trust was crucial for the success of social constructivist learning, as to most students, 'it was easier to work with people you already know [and] if you know them well enough… it made it quite a lot easier' (Aaron, p.c.). This socially constructed learning was also most enjoyable and rewarding for students. The following range of students' comments confirm this point:

> It didn't really come together properly until we were actually at the conference…. When we were actually there, we made a really good team…. Everyone got on really really well, and everyone was really helpful to each other in terms of reminding each other who was doing what, and just generally all supporting each other…. I think in the run-up to it… I didn't personally feel, during the meetings, like I was really that connected with everyone else. (Ashley, p.c.)

> Beforehand, we were all working in pairs and we didn't know what everybody was up to really, except for the meetings. Then when we got to the conference and everyone was helpful… I liked it because you were part of the team. (Aaron, p.c.)

> I think we worked really well, especially on the actual days. There wasn't that much communication during the meetings or after the meetings. But especially during the days, we worked really well…. [I had] a feeling that we were all in this together, and we all wanted the same outcome. (Marieke, p.c.)

> The relationships between the conference assistants built up to the conference…. The end goal was just to make sure that the conference was as successful as possible [so] it was different in a real working environment, than in an academic environment… [it was] working together as a whole. (Rachel, p.c.)

> I think we could all help each other…. There was never any bitchiness; no one wanted to get one over on anyone…. In groups, I think you find that someone always tries to take over… but we couldn't, and I really liked that! … I wasn't on my own with what I was doing. (Adele, p.c.)

> During the event, everybody was great. We all got along well, and I thought it really helped the team…. I thought the team worked really well together, and we all had our strengths…. We had all struck up a good friendship… [and] we all had a good time as well…. During the conference… there were more than two of us around at any time so… we would make a decision [together]. I think that we

> were with different people [assistants] helped a lot, rather than if I was just with Harriet, so as a team it was less intimidating to go and approach somebody else… and I think that made the team stronger because we weren't just… assigned to one place at one time…. I think that's why we all worked well together… being part of a team…. Had that not happened, it clearly could have shown through during the conference…. We could really rely on each other to perform certain tasks…. It was really comforting to know we were all in the same situation, and we could talk to each other. (Amy, p.c.)

> It really put me at ease… during the conference because I finally got to know them [assistants]…. Team work was really good [because] everyone got on really well. (Harriet, p.c.)

> We really enjoyed working in a group…. It would have been less enjoyable if there were not many of us [who] were all in the same boat and had similar experiences…. We were all different chapters [and] we all got on well, especially at the end. (Cat, p.c.)

Working effectively in collaboration also provided opportunities for excitement and enjoyment, a state of *shared* feeling quite pivotal to Harriet:

> When we were packing [one day prior to the event], I remember… when we were sorting out the delegate packs, everyone was just really hyped up and excited about the event, which put me at ease, because me and Amy were both really excited about it and couldn't wait to get stuck in… and for them to be just as excited, rather than being like 'O I can't be bothered'… they were actually really looking forward to it, and that was… a good way for building teamwork. (Harriet, p.c.)

Students' experiences of effective team work were shaped by feelings of democracy and equity, as well as the fact that they valued each other's contribution and support. Indeed, *because* the teamwork was effective and positive, students enjoyed their work during the conference, which showed in heightened levels of commitment and initiative, which will be discussed in the following section.

Encouraging leadership

The democratic nomination of the head assistant, Marieke, was yet another positive experience. (Rachel too was nominated by a range of students, although being one voice behind Marieke, she was not elected. During the event, however, Rachel somewhat adopted a leadership role, and was as such perceived by the other students.) Interestingly, there appeared to be a general consensus that a team leader was necessary, whether nominated or self-nominated, which seemingly provided some comfort and safety in situations where advice and help was needed. Marieke grasped that 'it is psychologically always a good idea to have that one person' (p.c.). Not all students agreed that leadership was necessary: 'I think because we were all quite competent… there wasn't such need for, you know, the hierarchy…. We were all sort of equal level!' (Rachel, p.c.). Nonetheless, the majority of students particularly valued the commitment and professionalism that both, Marieke and Rachel invested in their leading roles, as reflected in the following comments:

Rachel is really helpful, and she'd do anything to get the job done, and that's a good thing…. It's really comforting to have someone like that who takes on that role and you can go to for whatever reason, and who knows what's going on, so you can ask her…. She is a natural leader…. When we nominated a leader… I thought it would be Rachel…. I can understand why Marieke would be a leader because she is very approachable and friendly as well, and she is calm…. I would have nominated Rachel probably, to be honest. (Aaron, p.c.)

Marieke was a strong leader, and it was good that she was given the task of head assistant. She is somebody you can approach and ask for help whenever you want…. She was very good. She definitely seemed to have more experience than anybody else, and as the leader we could ask her questions if we needed to ask her anything, and she seemed to know what was going on all the time, which was really helpful…. I think Rachel [also adopted leadership] because she knew all the delegates by name. (Amy, p.c.)

Marieke is really good at being – I think that is why she was selected as a head assistant – she is good at not telling people what to do, but being a good organiser, and I really like the way she did it, instead of saying to people 'you need to do this; you need to do that'. She was very informal about it, but that was a good thing because it made us feel less frantic, if anything went wrong during the event…. She made sure that she looked after everybody, rather than just staying in one place. And she is quite light-hearted in her personality, which definitely made it easier than someone who likes to be a leader but gets stressed out at the same time. [Were there other people who took a leadership role?] I think Rachel… she did help, she was so helpful throughout the whole event. She did give off the impression that it did get her quite, not stressed, but she was quite frantic about things, rather than taking a deep breath…. Marieke made us feel at ease. I think there was a delegate who needed a lift to – was it London? – and the delegate seemed quite stressed about that, but Marieke helped her to resolve the situation and was like 'ok, we will do this and do that, give me a contact number, we will ring you if we find anything out', and it was all very structured. (Harriet, p.c.)

I voted for Marieke; I knew Marieke would get it… because she always seems confident… and I knew she would get the job done. Also, I think because she is a bit older… like she had experience…. [Did this help the team?] Yes, I think it did, because if we could not find yourself… we could always go to Marieke if we needed help. She was always switched on, sort of thing…. Rachel is very good in what she does and has a particular way of going about things and that needs to be understood and valued…. She is a big asset to the team…. When she was at the reception desk when we finished on the Sunday… she stayed there; she was very committed. She wanted the very last thing done and she was very committed to her work and in general. It's good that she did it. (Cat, p.c.)

Some of the comments show that both students, Marieke and Rachel, were perceived to be different kinds of leaders, even though Rachel admitted that 'we all took responsibility… and we all communicated with each other, especially during the conference itself' (Rachel, p.c.). Whilst somewhat humble in reflection, Rachel did play a key role in completing certain tasks during the event, such as at the very end of conference:

Because we were all assigned different roles and purposes, perhaps if I couldn't find the person or didn't know where they were, it could be a bit irritating. For instance, on Sunday, the tail end of the conference perhaps was a little

> disorganised because everyone went to the keynotes and to lunch…. But then I remembered that the rooms needed to be checked, so I stayed to tidy the rooms. I think at that point, people [assistants] sort of disappeared [and then] I volunteered to stay on reception until they came back from lunch. So I was waiting on reception and no one came back, ha ha; they all sort of disappeared, but that was when people [delegates] wanted to get their luggage, sort of final checks of flights, ringing up for taxis. So it was perhaps a little bit irritating towards the end of the conference. I just wanted to make sure someone was on hand. (Rachel, p.c.)

Meanwhile, Marieke admitted that she 'didn't expect to be voted because… there were more obvious leaders in the group' (p.c.). Being voted as head assistant thus resembled a hugely positive learning experience. It led Marieke to 'find out that I can manage and be the leader in a very non-dominant way' (p.c.). Her attitude towards being a particular kind of leader was clearly important to both, Marieke herself and the other assistants, which stimulated dedication and commitment within the team: 'People can come to you with problems and [I wanted] to make sure that I am there for them, rather than impose my leadership…. They probably voted me for a reason, knowing that I would be a smooth leader, rather than someone who takes over.' (p.c.) Thus, Marieke's non-dogmatic leadership provided a safety net to the team; it modelled professionalism and responsibility, care and independent thinking:

> I just made sure that I had a really good overview of what was going on and where everyone was supposed to be…. I would change positions a lot. I was running around the building a lot and just making sure that everyone was happy with what they were doing, and if they wanted to change something to make sure they would tell me before doing something else. Or I would tell them [assistants] in advance, keep an eye on the time… keeping the awareness going. (Marieke, p.c.)

More generally, team work (even though somewhat framed through the rota system) was more meaningful and effective during the event, when students had numerous opportunities to negotiate roles and tasks amongst themselves. From an educational perspective, this makes clear that there should have been similar, social teamwork opportunities for students to engage in meaningful, constructive team work during the preparatory stage of the event.

Theme II: Commitment and Initiative

> On one day, it was really raining, and this man was walking with his laptop bag over his head, and I said 'Excuse me! Do you want to get under my umbrella?', and he said 'No' at first, but I insisted because I didn't want him to get his laptop wet. We walked all the way from the Dean Walters building to Blackburn House…. (Adele, p.c.)

Another pertinent theme that emerged from the research revolves around the notion of commitment and initiative. Specifically during the event, students showed high levels of commitment and motivation and excelled in their roles, requiring little or no guidance from the conference organiser or project leaders, whilst being highly supportive to delegates.

The sudden explosion in students' dedication seemed to stem from the goal-directed learning that culminated in the event. Aaron, for instance, reflected that 'we had a common goal, which was the running of the conference', which resonates with the claim that 'members of a team must understand the overall aim and mission to work to' (Pokras 2002:3). Clearly, students understood the common goal: 'Because we had something to work to, like a final product, that definitely spurred people on… because you have a much bigger goal to work towards.' (Harriet, p.c.). Students found themselves in the middle of a real event with real people. Rachel and Amy further reflected that:

> It's just sort of knowing if people were having problems during the conference…. It was just nice to know that I helped people to make things easier and help them out…. I remember specifically on the Sunday, I was standing outside trying to direct people…. I thought it was important to be on hand, so sometimes I'd leave the keynotes early to lead people. It was nice to… enjoy the keynotes and talks… but still thought at the end of the day, you're here for the job, rather than the perks and entertainment side, so I thought it was important to be professional and… be available throughout…. I was the most useful I could be for the delegates…. I was there to help, just trying to make sure that I was useful in every way I could all the time. (Rachel, p.c.)

> I have always liked working with people, and it is something I feel really passionate about…. We kept asking people were they OK… and it was just really nice that they knew we were catering for their needs and making sure that we give them what they want…. If we couldn't understand them, we had to try…. Everybody was really friendly…. I also looked after the refreshment room, and that was a good way of chatting to delegates and the sponsors. (Amy, p.c.)

Students' commitment also meant time management and professionalism, as revealed by Cat: 'to get there on time every morning because we didn't get much sleep [so] my time management skills have improved…. We felt like we were being responsible and we had to be professional.' (Cat, p.c.) Student showed real care and compassion towards the people attending the event. Harriet remembered that 'there was a kind of sense that we didn't want to let anyone down' (p.c.). Ashley described this commitment as 'just generally not waiting to be told to do something; *knowing!*' (p.c.). He went on to explain:

> We didn't just do [the tasks] because there was some money on offer…. Everyone wanted it to be as good as possible and cared about every detail of it. (Ashley, p.c.)

The above comments show that students moved *beyond* curriculum and compliance, and towards the position of the independent, autonomously thinking student. They demonstrated positive attitudes and perspectives towards themselves and others and clearly excelled in their commitment and initiative.

Rota system

A point frequently made in discussions surrounding students' commitment during the event involved the rota system of task stations (see appendix VI). The rota system was useful in setting a framework for both, the organiser and students: it ensured that all aspects of running the conference are 'covered' by the assistants, and it

allowed some flexibility for students to negotiate their tasks within this framework. The rota system involved students in various 'task stations', ranging from the registration desk and refreshment area, to assistance during paper and keynote presentations, and generic support of delegates' needs throughout the event. Rachel reflected on the range of tasks as follows:

> The conference itself [involved]… being at hand, making sure everything ran smoothly. So, when I was in charge of refreshments, I was boiling the water urns and made sure they were hot, arranging the selection for when it got busy, providing new cups and answering any questions delegates would have, like about keynotes or times for lunch [and] being on hand when the talks were going on, when things were being presented…. Being on hand just in case something happened [like] someone needed… first aid…. Then being on the reception, checking in the delegates, giving them their name badge and packs, and then helping with their enquiries, directions to specific shops or restaurants, and knowing where the rooms are. We would try and give them a tour as much as we could; if there was only one person at reception, they would be shown where to go, or if there were more people, we would give them a full tour of where they need to be in the delegate room…. There was one [Japanese] guy who, I remember, wanted to [attend] and there was a little confusion… [so] I was talking through it slowly and tried to make sure he understood what he needed to do. (Rachel, p.c.)

Some students, like Harriet, Marieke and Rachel, particularly enjoyed the work at the registration desk, remembering that:

> I enjoyed being at the reception desk… because I wanted to make sure that when people first arrived they get a good reception, and they were greeted by a friendly smile…. I saw it as being quite an important role…. I liked the fact that… we were the first people that they saw, and first impressions do count…. I just enjoyed the fact that I was able to help and be able to greet the delegates as well, get to know faces and names…. I definitely did learn more skills because it is a completely different environment to what I am used to and rather than it being someone complaining about something, which is what I am used to, it is a nicer environment. (Harriet, p.c.).

Yet this task appeared more daunting to more timid students like Amy, Adele and Cat, which helped them to develop more confidence in themselves, an issue explored further in a subsequent section of the report. Instead, students like Adele and Cat excelled whilst manning the refreshment area:

> Me and Cat were in the [refreshment] room that no one was coming in… [so] we were trying to entice people to come into our room…. One the second, third and last day there were people coming in [and] it was manic… and we had to be quick because there were lots of people forming queues and people taking biscuits…. People were asking for different things [but] I wasn't on my own [so] I think that worked well. (Adele, p.c.)

> On Thursday, I ended up working on the refreshments in the bigger room downstairs with Adele, and no one was coming in that room… but then that changed… so people would go in both rooms…. I think that was the only day I worked on refreshments. (Cat, p.c.)

Thus, the rota system ensured that all students experienced any and all facets of running the event, regardless of what strengths students brought to each 'task station', and students clearly appreciated the clarity and structure of the system, as well as the multifaceted nature of tasks they were involved in:

> The rota system was a good thing. I just put it in my back pocket, and I knew where I had to be at what time…. I think that was the reason why we didn't need too much guidance… and if we wanted to swap in certain sessions, then we organised it ourselves. (Aaron, p.c.)

> I checked the rota system every two minutes…. Even at the registration desk, there was a spare one, so we were all checking what was next. Even at the dinner times we rotated… which turned out for the best. (Adele, p.c.)

> We had the timetable on us… [and] made sure that every morning we had one…. We were double-checking [for delegates] where the rooms were…. It was really handy… to be given certain roles, rather than just floating around. (Amy, p.c.)

> It was definitely helpful because you could plan your next move… it'd be like, we've got to go across to Blackburn House, so you were one step ahead of the delegates really. (Cat, p.c.)

The fact that students knew the exact times of sessions and breaks, as indicated in the rota system, also meant that they ensured the smooth day-to-day running of the event by managing delegates' time and reminding them, for instance, to leave the refreshment area in time for the next session. Here, students' initiative (they needed no reminders by the organisers) was absolutely crucial for the success of the event. Amy proudly remembered that:

> The hardest thing was to move them [delegates] on to the next session…. [How did you do that?] Very politely… [but] they would stand and carry on talking. I think at some point Marieke was saying 'how can we get them out of here?'… and so we had to move around all the little groups of people and encourage them forward… because you don't want to be rude to them and you don't want them to move out on what they have come for. (Amy, p.c.)

The rota system was designed to facilitate flexibility and negotiation within each task station for students to manage tasks and responsibilities amongst themselves. Adele, for instance, 'swapped with Cat on the last day because she really wanted to sit on one of the panels, so I took the refreshments on while she did that' (Adele, p.c.). Meanwhile, Cat remembered that 'On the last day, I wanted to sit in on one of the panels, and I think it was Adele who didn't really want to do it, so we swapped; she did mine and I did hers…. It suited both of us to do that.' (Cat, p.c.). Rachel and Amy similarly remembered how certain allocated tasks were re-negotiated and swapped amongst themselves:

> There wasn't much to do some of the other time, so sometimes I'd just be trying to think of other things that I could be doing, such as on the Saturday. I think it was when there were about four of us on tea duty [two in each room], but we knew that only one room was being used for drinks…. It didn't need four people, so I volunteered to go and sort out the delegate packs to be used. (Rachel, p.c.)

> I managed to get out on the Friday and go to one of the panels, as I really wanted to go and see what it was about…. I swapped with somebody… but I couldn't talk to you about it because you were busy, but I could talk to the other assistants and everybody I spoke was sympathetic and keen for me to go to the panel…. There was never a time when I was just standing around, and if there was, I would go and find something to do. (Amy, p.c.)

Clearly, the rota system allowed enough flexibility for students to show initiative and commitment. Rachel, for instance, found that 'although tasks were assigned for each assistant, there would be periods of spare time [which I wanted] to use… effectively. So I would volunteer for tasks… such as organising spare delegate packs [or] waiting outside the cathedral to guide delegates to the keynote venue, or at the end of the conference tidying the facilities and assisting until the entire final tasks were completed' (Rachel, PDP reflection submitted for MCAPCAPM3005, April 2009). In reflection, it is unclear whether students did require a framework (e.g. rota system) within which to manage and negotiate their individual tasks during the event. From the organiser's perspective, however, it was deemed too risky (for the success of the conference) to allow students complete autonomy in their roles. It would have been interesting to see how students would cope in a less prescribed, framed work environment so as to ascertain their level of preparedness to and control over problems in unfamiliar work situations.

Commitment during preparation: negotiating between university and WBL work

As stated thus far, students excelled in their commitment and initiative during the event. However, from our employer's perspective, it seemed that some students' commitment differed at the preparatory stage. Aaron, for example, 'had forgotten… that [he] was supposed to organise the recording of keynotes' (Aaron, p.c.). Adele, meanwhile, confessed that 'I didn't think we'd have so much to do leading up to [the event]; I thought it was about them four days [so] I realised that there was more work' (Adele, p.c.), and Amy similarly expected that the placement involved 'working on the conference for a week' (Amy, p.c.).

Indeed, the WBL placement was rather long-term (almost one academic year), requiring students to negotiate and manage tasks over a longer than usual period of time. Aaron remembered that 'at the time, it is a long way off… so it is not the priority at the moment' (Aaron, p.c.). This resembled a new experience to students, as none of them had been involved in long-term task management before and 'the only thing I had to plan is uni work [where] you think short-term' (Aaron, p.c.). As a result, students felt that 'when we had the first meeting, I thought maybe it was a bit too early…. As the time came closer and the meeting became more frequent… you need to get more motivated' (Aaron, p.c.). This initial 'not-knowing' may explain why students may have appeared less committed during the preparatory stage. It also explains why students struggled in coming to terms with the ambiguity surrounding the event and the abstract nature of their roles, an issue already addressed earlier.

Furthermore, students had to negotiate their WBL roles within the context of university study, specifically during the final year of their degree with its increased workload and heightened academic requirements. Adele, again, explained that 'I

think that some more than others took on a little more…. I did think everyone pulled their weight [but] maybe at times we slacked due to coursework or exams' (Adele, p.c.). Even those students still studying in their second year, like Amy, found it difficult at times to combine their academic and practical work, which meant she could not attend the evening socials during the conference, explaining that 'I had work to be handed in as well… and because I was out [at the conference] all day, I really needed to do my work in the evening' (Amy, p.c.). In some (albeit rare) instances, this also meant to turn down tasks, as in the case of Amy and Harriet, who were asked to help with some preparations just prior to the event (i.e. saving the presentation slides on the computers), yet felt that 'we definitely did not want our revision to be effected [and] I think it was important to say 'no' because if I had got bad marks… I would be really disappointed in myself…. I still need the degree; that was important' (Amy, p.c.).

Employers – in their role as WBL providers – should take into account that students will need to negotiate *real* work with (often complex, multifaceted) *academic* work, and that they are likely to be unable *fully* to commit to one or the other. In most instances, students will probably feel hesitant to decline certain tasks (as Amy and Harriet rightly chose to do) so as to prioritise between their different roles. It is thus of utmost importance carefully to balance students' academic and work commitments through a dialogue with them, a problem also raised by other students:

> It was hard to manage… because… once you accept a certain task, you just decide to do it [commit to it]. My other studies took a back seat, but at other times, I had to focus on an essay. It was hard to keep a very structured management of time as such. (Marieke, p.c.)

> There would be times when the coursework would take priority, only because they would have specific deadlines…. There would be times when I receive emails but because I had essays and lectures going on, I wouldn't do it for another two or three days. (Rachel, p.c.)

Students' commitment: some examples

Whilst some students may have appeared less committed to us during the preparatory stage, there were indeed instances where students were highly committed to their roles. For instance, students needed to utilise written communication, as in Aaron's example, who succeeded – through informality and persistence – in securing 150 free USB sticks for inclusion in the conference packs. The following is an excerpt from his written email communication that reflects that an informal address (rather than formality) can lead to successful outcomes:

Dear sirs and madams,
My name is Aaron Horner based at LJMU, and I am writing in my capacity as conference assistant for the annual conference of the British Forum for Ethnomusicology.
My role as conference assistant is part of my WoW experience and is a core module on my final year.
This 4-day international event will be hosted by the PMS unit at LJMU, and we expect around 150 delegates from nearly forty countries.
We are in the process of gaining possible sponsorship from various companies and collecting materials needed to host the conference, which include… free promotional items for delegate packs.
We welcome offers for free promotional materials that can be included in approximately 150 delegate packs and function as advertisement by containing the logo/website of your company or organisation.
Items may include USB memory sticks, mugs, pens, pencils, platic bags, mouse pads, or similar.
Particularly we would like USB memory sticks to include in the packs.
If you department could be of any help, it would be greatly appreciated.
I look forward to your correspondence
With very vest wishes,
Aaron

Hi Aaron,
I have got 150 usb pens here with the information about the biological and earth sciences at JMU on them. Are these of any use?
Thanks
Sam

Yes that would be great thanks.
Where about are the USB's kept, or where are you based so I could collect them?
It might not be until early next week, if that's OK.
Thanks again
Aaron

Many thanks
Sam ☺

Hey let me know if you got my last message, my email is so weird when I am at home I basically just said I can meet you tomorrow but I don't know where byrom street is lol cheers!

Hi!
Where abouts are you studying in Liverpool? …. I am really busy this week so I need to make sure that you can meet me here tomorrow, as I've got the usbs counted out and ready for you to have, so you just need to meet me somewhere in byrom street and then I can give you the box of ubb's ☺ ….
Thanks Sam

Hey
I will find where this place is and meet you at 1 2moro!
Thanks again, heres my number [mobile] seeing as though you don't know what I look like! Give me a txt in the morning. See you soon

[ctd.]

Meanwhile, Marieke's dedication towards identifying potential venues for the evening entertainments is exemplary here, which was particularly evident in her ability to negotiate with the manager of the local venue Bluecoat, which required effective communication skills, assertiveness and professionalism:

> The Bluecoat was definitely… one of my highlights…. I was really keen to find out whether the outside space was available for a reception on the night, so I contacted the person involved and they gave me the contact details of the manager, and I arranged a meeting with her, just to go and have a look at the

> different rooms, really. She was waiting there and gave me a folder, price list and everything, and took me for a whole tour and showed me lots of places that I had never seen before. There were some really nice backrooms that led out onto the courtyard, which were very expensive. But then I did 'switch on' [talked about] the 160 professors from all over the world, because I think they do give discounts for art-involved things. After about an hour or so, she said we could make that 50-60% discount, which I thought was really good! It was just interesting to see how that works as well, and that you are taken seriously…. [I said that there'll be] many people from all over the world, highly academic people, and that I really wanted it to be there. I told her that many of the people hadn't even be to the UK, and that it was such an amazing historic building…. I flattered them. (Marieke, p.c.)

This example clearly shows instances in which some students excelled in initiative, persuasion and charm. Most importantly, *personal* commitment was crucial in Marieke's success:

> That is something that I have learnt: flattering is good, but if you personally believe in something, you can bring that across very well, and sometimes that has a good effect. That was why it was my little success, because she understood. (Marieke, p.c.)

Rachel, meanwhile, was highly committed in supporting the conference organiser in maintaining sections of the conference website as well as the delegate database, which required flexibility, high commitment and effective communication:

> The website… was already set up, so all we had to do was… contributing to different parts of the website [including] the FAQ section [and] the accommodation details…. Initially, we tried to make a forum on the website but found it was easier [for delegates] to contact me [and] I would try and pair up people as best as I can…. [For] the database… the finance office would send me the details of people who are coming…. I think there were about 170 delegates… so it was a lot. (Rachel, p.c.)

Meanwhile, Cat was given tasks surrounding the conference website, as well as compiling information about stationery prices, items for the conference packs, etc. In hindsight, she reflected on these tasks as follows:

> I learnt good problem-solving…. I learnt to use a website builder… [and] I worked with Aaron on the stationery and things, because there were certain things he couldn't find. I spent one afternoon for 3 hours trying to find out some cheaper stuff…. I quite enjoyed it and is something I could use in the future. (Cat, p.c.)

Amy and Harriet were given tasks around marketing, sponsorship and promotion. Being second year undergraduates in media and cultural studies and with some experience in public relations through part-time employment, they found that 'the tasks we were given did suit our abilities a lot' (Amy, p.c.). Both students were highly engaged in their tasks, whilst experiencing some set-backs, which led towards further initiatives to succeed in their given tasks. They explained:

> Sometimes we were let down by people [organisations; companies; etc] not responding to our emails [asking for sponsorship and/or promotional items],

and it made me realise the amount of work you have to put in because we did do a lot, running around and chasing emails, but still, people didn't get back to us…. It was a good experience on the whole to learn that if somebody says 'yes', that doesn't mean 'yes'…. We also got in touch with a couple of local restaurants [who] offered us a discount… [which] was good to have an offer and to use our initiative to try and get as much as we can…. It was nice to see your hard work getting somewhere. (Amy, p.c.)
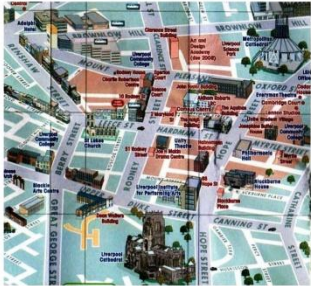
We literally were sending masses of emails and getting no replies…. We ended up doing a lot of work with trying to get freebies to go into the conference packs, and that was also over the internet through emails…. I had a piece of advice from a woman from a PR company who said 'If you really want something, these days people just send emails, don't send it through email. Call in, do it first-hand, face to face or write a written letter!', so that is what we ended up doing…. Obviously sending emails and waiting for a reply… was a bit disheartening, but in the end, we ended up getting a sufficient amount of bits and bobs. (Harriet, p.c.)

Whilst promotion and sponsorship appeared to pose the most significant challenges for Harriet and Amy, they also had the task of compiling information for the delegate handbook, which they accomplished with dedication and attention to detail. The information contained in the delegate handbook were incredibly useful for the international delegates, as they included maps, contact numbers, emergency information, cash machines, local facilities, health information, and much more (see Images 9 a-d)).

Images 9 a-d: Excerpts from delegate handbook on "Practical Information", as compiled by Amy and Harriet

Clearly, students contributed significantly to the preparation of the conference, even though some students did accomplish more than others. The differences resulted from the differing nature of the allocated tasks. For example, researching and collating information is already a familiar activity for students, as they are used to conduct similar tasks in their academic studies. In other instances, the success of students' work was more determined by the social interactions with people whom they encountered, whether via email or face-to-face. In such instances, students' own social and interpersonal skills determined their success, and with it, perceived commitment and initiative.

Yet how did students learn from their experiences during work-based learning? This is the concern of the following section with its focus on the value of critical self-reflection in work-based learning.

Critical self-reflection in work-based learning

The 'real-life' nature of work-based learning allowed and necessitated opportunities for students' critical self-reflection. The value of reflexive learning is well-documented in the academic literatures, which often stipulate that learning, which is reflexive, is deeper and longer-lasting. In the context of WBL, this is equally true, as 'you are most likely to learn from your work placement if you spend time reflecting upon each aspect of it' (Fanthome 2004:55).

During this project, reflexive learning often occurred as a result of the project leaders' occasional interventions in students' tasks, for instance in the form of email reminders, which (in some cases) sought to model 'good practice' to them (example

3, pp. 15-16). For instance, Amy and Harriet who were responsible for marketing and promotion received the task of sending email shots to organisations, companies, etc. Here, the conference organiser provided sample letters to model the writing style and format, which was deemed useful by the students:

> To begin with, you gave us an example and we then sent you by email an example of a letter we had made up, and you told what to change around…. I think without your help, we definitely would have found it difficult to structure the email because you've got to structure it in the right way… politely and professionally, like you don't want to sound like you are just begging for money or looking for donations. You have to prove it is a good opportunity… for promotions. (Amy, p.c.)

Amy felt that she could take stock of her own strengths and weaknesses, and thus develop as a person, reflecting that 'I have been able to get more skills and develop interests in different areas, and I think it has helped me develop as a person' (Amy, p.c.). However, in some cases, the guidance and intervention appeared to have a negative effect on students, as it undermined their autonomy and sovereignty:

> I was disappointed [when] a few weeks back, I got an email from Sian [who] wanted me and Aaron to speak with Amy and Harriet [to collaborate in collecting promotional materials]. I would have liked if Amy and Harriet would have spoken to us, rather than go through [the project leader]…. I think we would have got together and sorted something out. (Ashley T., p.c.)

Obviously, interventions were necessary to eliminate errors with potentially negative consequences, and thus to ensure the success of the conference, and yet as a result, students often felt 'a little worried [and] under pressure' (Ashley T., p.c.), specifically during the preparatory stage of the events management. Others, meanwhile, had more positive views of the project leaders' interventions:

> Because we are still university students, I wouldn't say we are quite fully capable of doing dome of the things on our own. I think you [conference organiser] did provide opportunities for initiative, but at the same time, perhaps it's almost like a safety net that sets the base level…. That was quite beneficial. (Rachel, p.c.)

> I have gone straight from school into university, and in school you are always monitored all the time and you can't do anything on your own…. Coming into uni… you have the freedom… but I still have to ask other people…. I am not confident enough in myself to just go and do something on my own…. We were all allowed to put our own input in… put out own little stamp on it…. But [your guidance] put us back on the straight and narrow… because you were monitoring us…. It was still freedom, but set freedom, if you know what I mean. (Adele, p.c.)

> I didn't mind [the organiser's intervention] as long as it looks good in the end, that's fine. It just shows you have to proof-read, doesn't it? I've learnt that a lot recently. I mean you were in charge so if you needed to change something, that's fine…. It's the only way of working towards something big. (Cat, p.c.)

Once students had experienced the actual event and their understanding of an academic conference was no longer 'abstract', they were better able to take stock of

their achievements and recognising how some tasks may have been completed more effectively. Aaron, for instance, who was responsible for obtaining free conference items by sending out emails to companies and organisations (see scenario 1, example 3), learnt from the organiser's intervention by reflecting as follows:

> When I sent the email [to Cain's Brewery], it didn't sound very professional; it sounded a bit naïve and immature… but you hope someone will take you up [reply]…. When I sent the sample email, I did get a response…. You gave us the sample to use, and at the time I didn't think I needed to use a sample. But when I look back, I can see it was relevant to what I needed to do. [Would you do it differently next time?] I would spend more time… and then get someone to look at it to see if it sounds good…. Yes, I would do it differently. (Aaron, p.c.)

Clearly, students reflected on their experience, often recognising their errors or weaknesses with hindsight, and thus learning from self-critique. The following case-studies will illustrate students' self-reflexive learning with the help of concrete examples.

Creative writing and design: a case study

Students seemed to learn best through experiencing new tasks, especially because they did *not* possess certain skills, as in Adele's task, requiring her to update specific sections of the conference website, or designing the front cover of the delegate handbook and social event programme. As mentioned above, Adele felt uneasy without clear guidance and support, which perhaps led to the mistake of uploading incorrect material on the website, which, in turn, led the organiser to intervene (see scenario 3, example 3, pp.15-16). More specifically, midway into the placement, Adele was asked to write about Liverpool's multicultural communities and musics. It was anticipated that Adele would conduct background research into the city's history and ethnic make-up, and write a short, but engaging report that would be of potential interest to conference delegates. Adele already had password access to the conference website (she was also asked to write the travel section), so she was able to upload the report just prior to one of the March update meetings (see below for the example).

As mentioned earlier, the conference organiser felt the report was unsuitable for the academic readership that this was aimed at. Adele remembered that 'I didn't even think of the Irish…. I just wrote… about Chinatown and the Chinese population, and a tiny little snippet of every other culture. When you [deleted it] I was a bit upset, to be honest' (Adele, p.c.). For whatever reason, Adele used other websites to gather the information and due to time pressures, uploaded these onto the conference website. In hindsight, Adele confessed that:

> …the stupid things I said I just took off websites because… I thought that day was the absolute deadline…. So I took it off websites and stuck it up… which was really stupid of me. I do see now why you took it off… but at the time I had other work to do and I must have thought 'how ungrateful'.' (Adele, p.c.)

A little bit of history.

Liverpool can be said to be a multicultural society, which is apparent in the shops, restaurants, pubs and clubs within Liverpool, particularly within the City Centre. There are a range of Chinese restaurants, Irish pubs, Latin clubs amongst many others that are beyond words. On your visit to Liverpool, you will be able to experience the city's multicultural society in full. China Town occupies a large area in the city centre, which is one of the oldest in the world; it is situated around Nelson Street and Duke Street, thus in close proximity to the DEAN WALTER'S BUILDING (where the conference is held). Liverpool's China Town has the largest arch at their gateway entrance of all China Town's in the world (Other than China's). Here you can find many great restaurants and shops that are worth visiting whilst in Liverpool.

Liverpool has one of the oldest established Chinese communities in Europe, with an estimated 1.6% of the Liverpool population being of full Chinese descent, which calculates to 7,100 people. The history of this dates back to the 19th century when Liverpool and China were trading goods to one another via ships. "The Chinese settled around the dock area, most notably on Cleveland Square, Pitt Street and Frederick Street. But this changed when most of the area was destroyed during World war II. This prompted the Chinese community to move out into the suburbs, with a few moving to Nelson Street and George Square, where the shipping company Holts had established a new seaman's hostel to replace the boarding houses lost in Pitt Street and Cleveland Square. From here Chinatown grew organically to take in much of Berry Street, Duke Street and Upper Parliament Street". (http://www.liverpoolcityportal.co.uk/attractions/china_town.html)

[First version of the website text on Liverpool's multicultural heritage]

The situation caused upset for Adele who was called into the office for a discussion with the conference organiser. She later confessed that 'I was a bit taken aback by this…. When I got home I read the email Simone had sent [and] was upset by the email and felt I needed to explain myself to Simone. I emailed her back telling her how I was unsure of what she meant by the level of English. Simone emailed me back apologising for the way in which the email was written as she could see how it would have upset me. She explained what I needed to do for next time.' (Adele, PDP reflection submitted for MCAPM3005, April 2009). In her PDP, Adele further reflected on the experience as follows:

> I had written information about Liverpool being a multi-cultural society for the website which was taken off by Simone due to grammatical and spelling errors. I was upset by the way in which the situation was dealt with; however, I can now understand why Simone had to interfere in this way as the information on the website reflected Liverpool, the University, and Simone as the Head of the conference…. I rewrote the information about Liverpool's diverse communities using Simone's [dissertation]…. (Both versions of the writing are in the appendix.) (Adele, PDP reflection submitted for MCAPM3005, April 2009)

Having finally accomplished this task to a good standard, the rewritten report found its way into the conference handbook, which turned the negative into a positive experience. During our post-placement discussion, Adele acknowledged that in the real world of work, she would work under similar kinds of pressures, and this incident helped her to reflect on how she would manage and respond to pressured situations. However, Adele also felt that the familiarity with her employers (both project leaders taught Adele on their modules) was important to cope with the incident, admitting that 'when I got upset over the website, if it was someone I didn't

know, I think I would have taken it more to heart' (Adele, p.c.). This attitude shows that Adele may be better suited in a less pressured work environment; whilst on the other side, academics (in their role as employers) may need to practice more *sensitive* management.
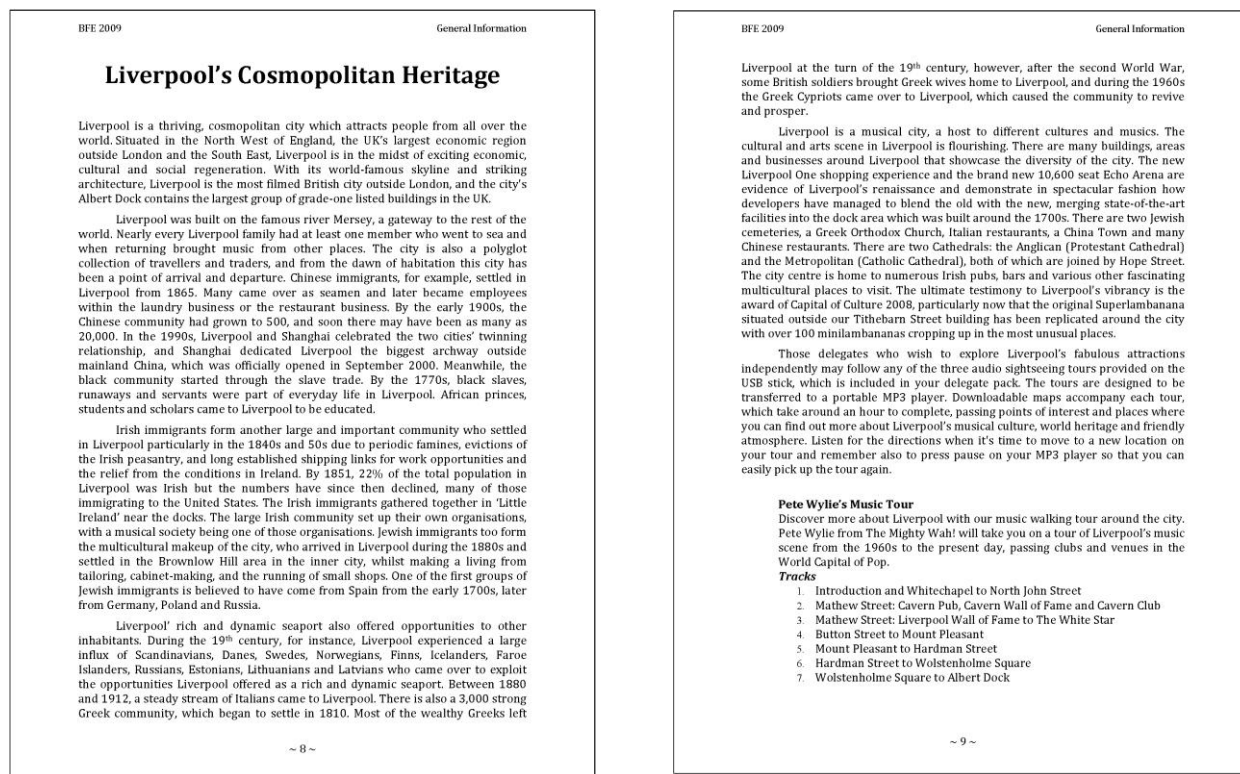

Image 10: Excerpts from delegate handbook on "Liverpool's Cosmopolitan Heritage", written by Adele

Meanwhile, the designs presented by Adele for the delegate handbook/event programme were not used for the event itself. In her PDP, Adele reflected that

> I took the role of designing the front cover [but] my design for the booklet was very simplistic and clean looking…. The group had already discussed the designs in the meeting which is what led [me] to use the different coloured 'bubbles' idea in my design for the front cover…. I thought a simple design would be more professional and easy on the eye as busy designs tend to look 'childish' and unprofessional. Simone did not use mine… for the front cover…. I understand why Simone did not use the idea as she pointed out to me in my interview how it did not relate to the idea of ethnomusicology. I have learnt from this experience. (Adele, PDP reflection submitted for MCAPM3005, April 2009).

Indeed, Adele recognised that the actual designs used for the event looked more professional and were more directly related to 'ethnomusicology' (Image 11), whereas her 'snooker ball' design had little to do with the theme of the conference:

> I was excited, a bit too excited to design the front cover…. Even though it wasn't used, I still feel [that] it helped in a way… even though you said 'no, that wasn't what I wanted!'…. I realised that the balls at the bottom looked like snooker balls…. When I saw the [final] front cover, I thought that was much more

> professional…. Yes, [my design] didn't even look like anything for music. (Adele, p.c.)
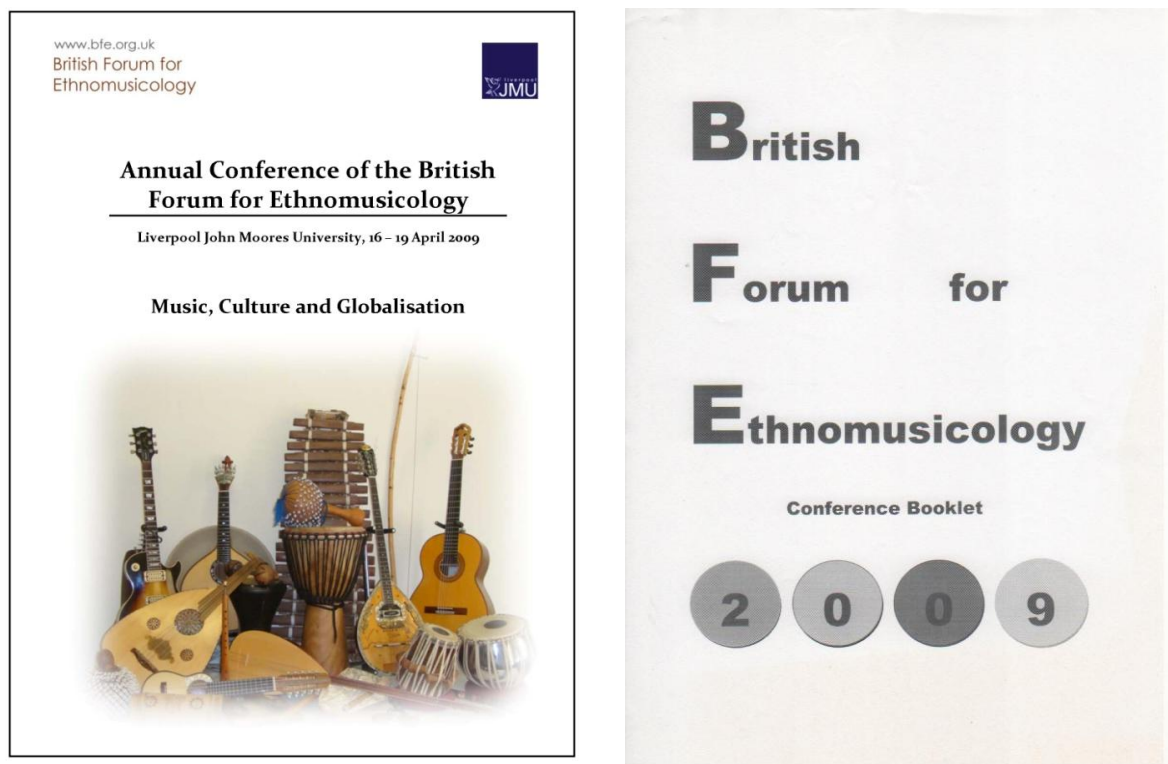

Image 11: Front covers of delegate handbooks: final version (left) and Adele's version (right)

With the instructions given during one subsequent meeting, Adele thus worked to the best of her ability and within her own parameters and imaginations. Yet once she had experienced the actual event, she admitted that if she was given a similar task again, she 'would use other ideas and look around at what was existing and obviously link it more to the actual conference [and] think what the design is for' (Adele, p.c.), concluding that:

> In the future, I would probably design two [versions], one that we discussed in the meeting, and then one of my own, and I would say I have designed that off my own bat [so] 'what do you think?'. (Adele, p.c.)

In her PDP, Adele clearly showed heightened awareness and learning through critical self-reflection:

> I have learnt from this experience because if I was asked to do something like this in the future I would design a couple of front covers using the idea discussed in the meeting and ideas of my own using a theme that related to the thing I was designing for. Gray *et al* argue that 'workplace learning… involves reflection on learning, learning through problem-solving and learning about learning itself' (Gray *et al*, 2004:4). Simone's design was more fitting to the conference as it used pictures of world music instruments for the main design. (Adele, PDP reflection submitted for MCAPM3005, April 2009)
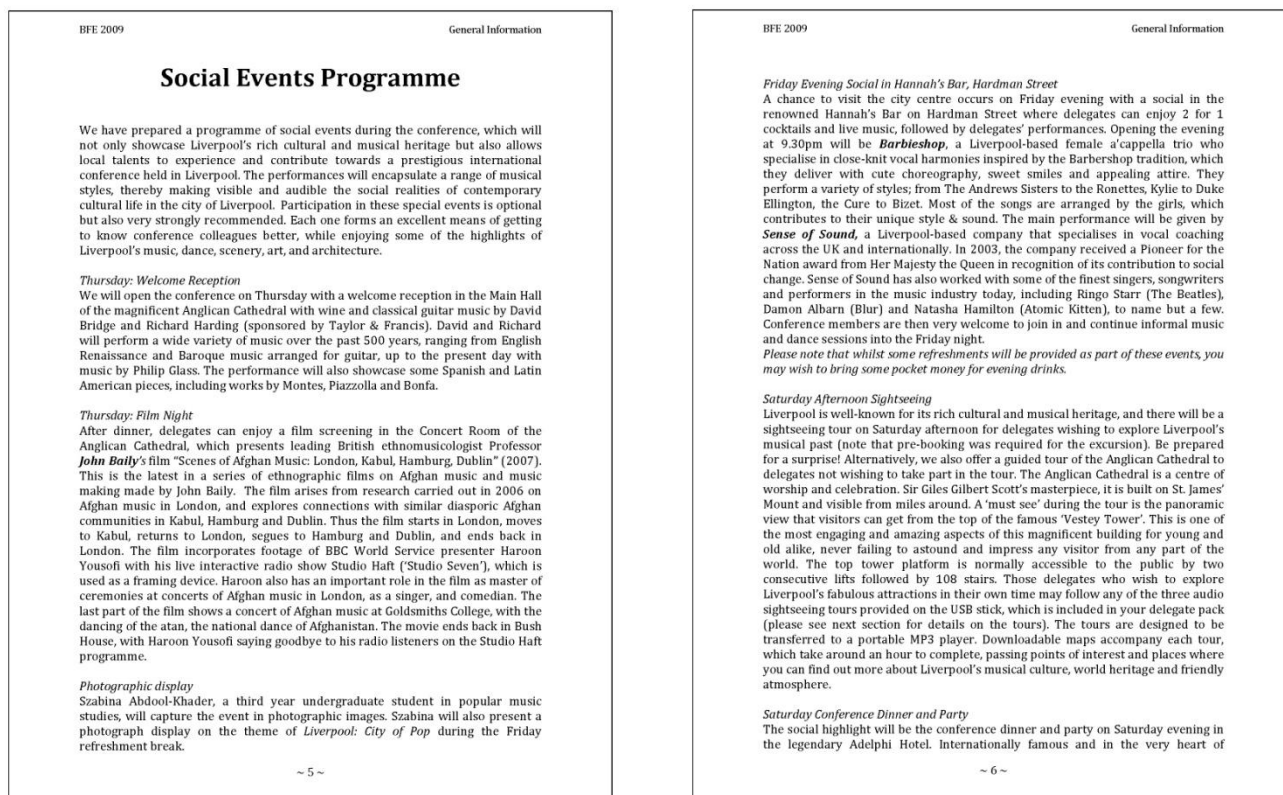
Events management: a case study

Image 12: Excerpts from delegate handbook on "Social Events Programme", partially compiled by Marieke

At this point, a second case study will exemplify the nature of students' self-critical, reflexive learning from their first-hand experiences. The task of supporting the events management, allocated to Ashley and Marieke, was an issue for intervention by the conference organiser. During the first meeting with assistants in October 2008, the students were asked to approach potential (world) musicians, who are based locally and would be willing to perform for a small fee, and to prepare an information sheet, including their styles, contact details and fees (a sample was provided). They were instructed that no agreements are to be made with the performers (this was done by the conference organiser). During the subsequent update meetings, however, the information sheet presented by the students included Western-style bands specialising in rock/pop/indie styles. The students were reminded by the organiser, both in meetings and via email, also to search for performers specialising in world musics. Rather than imposing our own (from the employer perspective) preconceived ideas about the most suitable performances, we wanted to allow students relative autonomy to guide their own learning. We hoped that by reminding students to look for other, more non-Western styles and genres, they would explore a range of different performance options. The following conversation between Marieke and the project leaders reveals the difficulties encountered by the students in approaching this task:

> We used the internet as our basis really to find the bands…. It did prove hard. It was a shame, there was less of that sort [world music] around than we had hoped…. It was really hard to find them. [There are certain local community

> organisations that you could have contacted. Would it have been good if I'd helped you more with that?] We had never heard of these organisations, so it never crossed our minds really, so in that sense yes. But it was good to do our own work. (Marieke, p.c.)

Perhaps for this reason, the final proposal for performances listed the same aforementioned bands, including a vocal group specialising in a modernist, ironic form of barbershop singing. From the conference organiser perspective, there were questions about the suitability of these groups (thus, alternative arrangements were made by the organiser). As already highlighted earlier, this particular event was a new academic experience to students, which impacted on their understanding of what was required during the preparatory stage. At the same time, misunderstandings between employer and students were common, whereby the conference organiser was convinced to have provided sufficient information and guidance, yet students clearly interpreted the task in entirely different ways. Marieke, for instance, felt that 'in the meetings, there was a positive response about the bands that we were suggesting' (Marieke, p.c.), and this miscommunication clearly led them in their decisions. In reflection, both students explained that:

> It was hard for us to really understand what was totally appropriate, and what was not. Had we maybe been to a previous conference, we would have understood more…. It was just not clear to us [what] was the absolute priority…. So if it had been a bit clearer from the start, we would not have wasted our time…. It was just, I guess, hard for us to really realise what usually happens at a conference like that… and what kind of music they would expect…. It was a great task to look for the bands in itself, but… we were just not aware that we should have concentrated on a certain type of music. (Marieke, p.c.)

> We got quite confused with which direction [they] were going in…. We got a bit jumbled ourselves…. We just got confused with communication, I think…. Because I had never encountered ethnomusicology before,… I was interpreting it in a way slightly off on a tangent to what I really understood it as during and after the conference. So… throughout the whole organising the conference, I was still maintaining that somehow the bands, that I was thinking of, fitted. (Ashley, p.c.)

Whilst students were reminded not to make any arrangements without the organiser's approval, during one of the very final meetings just prior to the conference, one student revealed that the barbershop singing group uploaded information on their MySpace site, which signified that a performance had been booked. However, the conference organiser did not intend to book that group,[2] and this turned into a real problem, as such instances can seriously harm the reputation of the university, organisation and academics involved. The conference organiser thus decided to contact the group directly to ascertain whether/or not the band had been booked by the student, which it confirmed. For reasons of reputation, moral

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[2] It is important to note here that ethnomusicologists study musical traditions from around the world, and barbershop singing is such a specialism, so it was deemed unsuitable to book a group specialising in a rather ironic version of this tradition, as it may have offended some academics. In fact, after the actual performance of the group, some delegates commented that the group 'isn't really from the barbershop tradition; they are more like hairdressers', which confirmed the organiser's initial concerns.

obligation and professionalism, the organiser thus decided to accept the booking and included the group in the informal Friday evening performances. This situation obviously impacted negatively on the concerned student to the point that she questioned 'whether it was worth it' (Marieke, p.c.). A follow-up conversation with the student clarified the situation. (Interestingly, the other student too had approached a band who uploaded similar information on their MySpace site, yet the organiser was not made aware of that, and the student apparently solved the problem on his/her own account.)

Clearly, in this instance, Marieke and Ashley required more guidance and instruction for their tasks, rather than allowing them too much autonomy and freedom, particularly for tasks involving negotiations with the public. It is thus paramount for employers regularly to supervise students' activities and actions, and to ensure clarity, communication and understanding. Marieke, for instance, felt the need for 'clearer guidelines… [and admitted that] maybe we should have asked for more help as well' (Marieke, p.c.). In hindsight, both students understood that in the real world:

> You have got to make the employer aware that you see things the way they see things. You're trying to achieve the ultimate goal that they're trying to achieve… , which I probably didn't do very well. (Ashley, p.c.)

> Obviously, you have to work very closely with the main organiser [and] keep feeding back. And that is, maybe, where we went wrong…. Now, in hindsight, we definitely would have worked differently…. Yeah, the result [performances during the conference] was great! It was just a shame that we did, I think, waste a lot of time. (Marieke, p.c.)

Importantly, experiencing the actual event itself enabled students to grasp, to *really* know from the inside. Ashley, again, commented that:

> Once the conference unfolded, we realised how you [conference organiser] had a very clear vision, or a much clearer vision of what was going to happen, and we just… wished we could have seen it that way beforehand…. [I didn't] understand ethnomusicology as a subject… and understand the people who were going to be attending…. It didn't really fully make sense to me until Saturday night… and it really clicked then…. I realised what it was all about…. Before then, I had a slightly warped perception of what it was going to be. (Ashley, p.c.)

Marieke even felt that having to find her own way of solving the task, even though it meant making mistakes, was a particularly valuable learning experience:

> It did take up a lot of time… [but] there was no need, so that was why I personally felt a slight frustration…. In a way, I wish that we wouldn't have spent all that time going in the wrong direction, but I understand that you learn extra hard this way. (Marieke, p.c.)

Thus, the value of WBL therefore lied in *real* experiences and reflections as they occurred in naturalistic settings. Stressing the 'real' nature of such experiences, Holford *et al* agree that 'the learning opportunities found in work-based learning programmes are not contrived for study purposes but arrive from normal work' (1998:213). Rather than experiencing artificial simulations or experiments, students

had real and relevant experiences, which in turn led them to recognise and understand their own transformations in attitude and perspective.

PART IV: The Value of Work-Based Learning

The value of *event management* for work-based learning

All students commented positively on their WBL experience, even Ashley T. who discontinued his placement prior to the event. He particularly appreciated the complexities of event management, and understood that it required considerations of 'food preferences… allergies or the technical aspects… and all the different aspects… [such as] the bookings on the internet… and giving directions to get to Liverpool [and] the logistical side… like people would be speaking different languages [and] money… [and] giving publishers books stalls [and] allow people to advertise or give leaflets… [etc]' (Ashley T., p.c.). Further comments reveal how complex the WBL experience appeared to students:

> It was… quite a daunting thing…. It sort of makes you think 'o god, how long must things take to organise'. The bigger the event, the bigger must just be the headache for managers…. I suppose you learn, when you organise an international event… to meet everybody's requirements. (Ashley T., p.c.)

> I learnt that it is not as straight forward because we had been discussing from October to April what bands… the designs… what bags… the conference packs… travel information… which no one had even thought of in the beginning. At the beginning, it was all about ideas, but then you had to follow it up. It was a lot harder to do, than we had all thought. I learnt that there is more to it: you can't just go into something with an idea; you actually have to follow it up…. I just thought it would be all about the music, which it wasn't. (Adele, p.c.)

> Working behind the scenes of a conference makes you realise how many aspects there are that you need to cover…. The aspect me and Amy worked on was only one aspect, but because we got the chance to speak to everyone [during update meetings], it had definitely made me realise how much there is to it. (Harriet, p.c.)

To most students, the positive experience arose particularly from the fact that the placements provided a *complete* learning experience that involved students right from the beginning (the planning stages) and lasted until the very end (the final day of the conference). Thus, students' most salient experience emerged from their first-hand experience of not only preparing, but more importantly *completing* a real event. A range of student comments exemplify this:

> That's what made it such a strong experience because you see it from the scraps, until dancing on the dance floor. That's what really made it! … It was a big plus point [to] have experienced it from beginning to end…. As soon as the conference started, I was totally committed. I enjoyed it! Just the preparations, you'd not see results before the actual conference. (Marieke, p.c.)

> I got more involved [preparing the event], rather than just turning up as an assistant on the day…. I was learning from October to the beginning of April [and] was glad we had done all that work beforehand. I looked forward to the conference more. It was hard work, but it was just lovely. I really did enjoy it. (Adele, p.c.)

> [It was] exciting, really really exciting, yes, just how all the hard work everybody was putting into it, and the last week you'd… make sure everything was fine, and then for it all to fall into place on Thursday. It really made the whole thing worth for me…. I found it really exciting not knowing and planning, then to see it all at the end. (Amy, p.c.)

> When you get there [conference site] and see the whole thing up and running and see it happening… then you realise what you have to do. (Aaron, p.c.)

> It was nice to… think through from the initial stage to the logistics of it all, and how it turns out. Yeah, it was nice knowing… how it was going to turn out, knowing it was all going to come together at the end. I enjoyed that! (Rachel, p.c.)

> We had been working on it for the past year and it was all kind of slowly coming together, and it was quite weird that it was there in front of us…. In the past, there has never actually been a final product. (Harriet, p.c.)

Other reasons for students' positive WBL experience were more specific. For instance, students associated a certain prestige and a sense of exoticism with this international academic event that attracted well-known delegates from around the world. Ashley, Rachel and Harriet agreed that:

> I was really… grateful. I thought it was amazing that I sat in a room with all these professors and doctors… [and] people from different countries who have completely diverse interests in music. (Ashley H., p.c.)

> I was aware… of how important it is… also sort of through the meetings [which] raised the importance of the conference, you know, especially in the beginning and the first days when so many people were saying how it was the biggest conference ever held by the BFE, let alone by the university faculty…. I know the importance of the conference [and was proud of] being part of something so monumental and eventful. (Rachel, p.c.)

> I couldn't believe it. Obviously you had told us beforehand, but when everyone was actually there… and you have got a whole room full of people from different cultures and different backgrounds, it was amazing! (Harriet, p.c.)

It seemed that the real nature of the event provided students with a real sense of purpose. Many felt to have made an important and real *contribution* to the success of the event. Rachel, Adele, Harriet and Cat, for instance, highlighted that:

> Seeing the little things I was able to do… to contribute, you know…. I contributed something… [and] was beneficial… knowing I actually contributed something bigger. (Rachel, p.c.)

> It made me look forward to the conference a lot more because I felt as if *I was part of it*, even though… I did [only] a little bit [that] impacted on the conference. (Adele, p.c.)

> I liked the fact that… we took a big part in trying to organise what they [delegates] did. (Harriet, p.c.)

> I think it was meeting new people, and working there [at the conference] felt we were a part of it. (Cat, p.c.)

The students also valued the fact that this particular placement provided interesting social opportunities with the delegates. Many students found it particularly intriguing to converse with the delegates to learn something about their countries, professions, work, and musical interests. For instance, Amy and Harriet felt that:

> It was so exciting to see where people had come from and you talk to them and recognise them over the weekend; that was good…. Talking to the delegates was a great opportunity…. That was really great to be able to talk to people. (Amy, p.c.).

> I honestly didn't realise [during the preparation] that we would get familiar with the faces and names and actually get to speak to them [delegates], and sitting in the panels was really good because obviously I don't have any knowledge on ethnomusicology or any kind of music stuff, but no, that was good…. I did really, really enjoy it. (Harriet, p.c.)

Similarly, Adele remembered that 'I really enjoyed learning by meeting them people' (p.c.), an experience so pivotal as it 'did bring out a more confident part in me' (p.c.). Indeed, the development of confidence was mentioned by the shyer and more timid students, like Adele, Amy and Cat, who admitted that 'I'd rather work behind the scenes and helping people getting the information' (Cat, p.c.), further revealing that:

> I don't think I would have been as confident now… because I was dealing with people I didn't know…. I was most worried about the registration desk. I looked at people like Rachel… [because] greeting people at the registration desk was probably the hardest thing I had to do…. Yes, I am like that, I cannot even talk on the phone in front of people…. It was still very hard to go out and say 'Hello, how can I help you?'. I always feel embarrassed, but I realised that that is stupid…. I felt I was able to help people… and I wasn't just standing there looking around [and instead] would go over and say 'do you need any help?'. I became more confident because I thought they [delegates] are probably more embarrassed and shy than me because they were coming from a different country. (Adele, p.c.)

> Working on the conference has really helped to build my confidence, and that I can meet people being the first person they have seen has helped me on a more personal level. I thought it was good to offer a friendly face and a little bit of chit-chat…. [Did you recognise any weaknesses and overcame them?] I think at the beginning it was my confidence talking to people… [and] midway through the event I felt much more confident. (Amy, p.c.)

> I felt like… I've learnt more about myself and that I can do things, such as leading a group and having control over situations. I am more confident now… There were more age ranges, people were 40 years older than us, and I felt it was really interesting, and to be able to deal with people from different age groups and feel respected by them…. I feel more confident now…. I'm definitely more confident now, and I realise that I can do jobs that I've never done before. (Cat, p.c.) Whilst I don't think I would go into… event management or similar sectors, it is the way in which I have coped with working within the environment that has been the most successful outcome of the experience…. [I have] become more confident as the project progressed. Through this process I have realised that I

> can work successfully both individually and in a team environment. (Cat, PDP reflections submitted for MCAPM3005, April 2009)

Yet it was not only the shyer students who commented on heightened levels of confidence, as the following comments show:

> Well, the whole conference thing, I just feel a lot more comfortable in these surroundings now, because beforehand… I really haven't had the opportunity to work within these environments. (Harriet, p.c.)

> On the first day of the conference [I] found my confidence then increased when working with other assistants during the following three days. I also spoke frequently with delegates from all around the world… I enjoyed this thoroughly…. I had to retain a level of professionalism and confidence when speaking with the delegates and received compliments from many, who were very appreciative of my help and friendliness. I quickly realised that positive responses from delegates actually inspired me to continue my competent attitude. (Aaron, PDP reflection submitted for MCAPM3005, April 2009)

As pointed out in Aaron's comment, students particularly valued and appreciated the recognition and reward received from the international delegates attending the event. Indeed, reward and recognition was pivotal in students' commitment towards the delegates and conference as a whole, as 'behaviour that is condoned and rewarded is repeated; this works equally with negative behaviour that is penalised will then often be eradicated' (Brooks 2006:33). Other students' comments support this claim:

> Because they were really appreciative… you want to help them, because you know they have come a long way and it means a lot for them to be here. Understanding that does want to make me help them even more. (Aaron, p.c.)

> I enjoyed everything, really! I enjoyed seeing how the panels worked and listening to the people presenting their work. I enjoyed meeting the professors. I enjoyed being with the assistants…. I think we all played a significant role as assistants and… we were getting… feedback from the delegates, which was really nice. (Marieke, p.c.)

> I was really pleased [that] right from the start I was meeting people at the moment they first entered the building…. It was just a really social event, the whole thing, even in the short breaks…. Everyone was chatting away…. It was amazing how quickly the whole group and the assistants… became sort of one big unit…. It was really nice on the last day when people made the effort to come and say 'thank you' to you before they left, rather than disappearing and never seeing them again. It is probably one of the only jobs I have ever had where people come and hug and kiss you to say 'thanks very much for having us'. (Ashley, p.c.)

> [Did you feel rewarded?] Yeah, definitely, by the delegates… and we really did feel like we helped… because at the end of the day… we definitely contributed towards it because if we had been very quiet, rude, just taking no interest in it, then they would have had probably a bad experience. Clearly, we have given them a good experience, which I am really glad about. (Harriet, p.c.)

> I think the whole thing was rewarding; just working there [at the conference]…. The delegates were positive and nice and felt that they could come to you for even the littlest things…. Just the feeling that no one was unhappy with what we did. (Cat, p.c.)

Students also felt that WBL provided a necessary *transition* from the academic ('abstract') world of academia to the ('real') world of work. Students valued that this was a *real* work-based learning placement, rather than experience gained from abstract simulation or artificial experiments. It is 'a taste of the real world' (Aaron, p.c.). At the same time, 'it is so much more difficult outside of university… to get work experience' (Harriet, p.c.). Students generally agreed that work-based learning can promote various skills:

> … skills you are not used to in a university environment [because] doing an essay is different than doing a conference, so you pick up key skills and work in a team and learn to plan better, be more professional…. It is useful, rather than finish uni and apply for a job. (Aaron, p.c.)

> It's nice… when we get to go beyond just being in a lecture room… and actually work on something, together, and be more involved…. I always imagined university [study] to be a much more interactive thing. (Ashley, p.c.)

> Instead of saying, I am good with people, now I can say I know I am good with people. I now have examples of that…. For a potential future employer, I am more confident to voice… my skills because I have done it, not just in my head…. And, I have practised them on such a [large] scale as well. (Marieke, p.c.)

> Events management, website skills,… initiative, and sort of people skills and problem solving… I knew I sort of had a little bit… but not full-blown work experience…. More confidence in terms of my capabilities of what I can do… knowing this…. It's the knowledge… [of] work ethic. (Rachel, p.c.)

> It gave me more of an insight into how a job in the media and music industry would be…. There was no training and we were all left to sort things out ourselves, which was a really good thing because that's what you would have to do in real life. You would have to think on your feet in a job like this…. This job helped me to think that I need to be more aware of what is expected of me. I can't just put my hand up and say I need help…. I would take it upon myself to go and do something…. So I have learnt to use my own initiative. (Adele, p.c.)

> Organising performances, maybe… being able to use technology… making sure there's communication… working with others…. It has made me think a lot more. I don't want to go into events management. I'm more organised now… but my personality might not be that good. (Cat, p.c.)

Clearly, students had emic, insider perspectives into the real world of work and were able to 'see' and acknowledge their own skills, attributes and knowledge much better. As a result, they also understood the usefulness of their own reflexivity for students' employability. In some cases, students even began to perceive academic work differently, which also marked a kind of transformation in understanding the value of academic work:

> Since the start of uni, I have never quite felt like it has manifested itself as anything real. When you're researching books from the library… [I ask] 'what's

> the point?'…. I didn't fully appreciate the point until… the conference…. It just felt very real; it felt they were really doing something positive towards music and people…. I perceive my essays differently from now on. (Ashley, p.c.)

> This was all about what we are studying right now [music and globalisation]. It really made me feel that you are not alone in studying music in such an academic way…. It just gave me a better overview of what subjects you can deal with in globalisation research. That was definitely useful. (Marieke, p.c.)

> The panels, I thought, were really interesting…. I enjoyed the keynote speakers… especially Timothy Taylor because we had all read his books. (Adele, p.c.)

> The conference as a whole enabled me to engage with academic research and discussions in ethnomusicology…. As I was currently studying [similar topics] all the topics were not only relevant, but proved helpful. I particularly developed my knowledge of ethnographic research methods and I applied some of these when researching salsa music in Manchester, but also in the write-up of my research where I was able to apply and discuss terms such as 'diaspora' with an extra sense of understanding. The keynote on Globalisation by Timothy Taylor seemed to reflect and summarise much of what I have learnt as a student the past 3 years…. (Aaron, PDP reflection submitted for MCAPM3005, April 2009)

> Whilst the event itself was centred around ethnomusicology, it did relate to the work that we undertook on our degree. Most prominently when looking at the concept of globalisation, and the affect that this has had on world music as a genre….. It was easy to see the correlation between this newer information and what we had already learnt. (Cat, p.c.)

In another instance even, the WBL experience awoke a new career option in the music industry (for Amy) and in events management (for Harriet). Indeed, a 'work placement can be beneficial in informing and influencing career decisions' (Fanthome 2004:3). Both students commented that:

> Working on the promotion side of things [was useful] as I have followed that up… working alongside bands now…. It has given me an interest in organising things… and an interest in music, which I have not really had before, so it definitely opened up a new career possibly…. I have always wanted to work in journalism, so it's changed. (Amy, p.c.)

> Since we have done the conference, its has made me realise that I really do prefer the whole process of organising an event, whether it is a conference, a music event, a charity show. That is definitely something I want to look into…. After doing the event, working on the conference was one of the reasons why I contacted [name] from Another Media [a locally-based company] because I know they do a lot of charity events…. I am definitely interested in the events-side of things. (Harriet, p.c.)

Employability, Or Employment?

> Work-based learning definitely teaches a level of professionalism [and] work ethic…. I think real work placements are so beneficial to not only gain experience in that role…. It makes you leave… the nice cushiness of university…. Work placements are better to do, rather than coursework

> [because] you contribute to something whole rather than just working on my piddly-little assessments. I was benefiting somebody else, rather than… myself…. You can think through how you deal with situations, but actually doing it and knowing that you've done it… is so much better! … Thinking is so much different once in action. … You are forced out of university into the real world! (Rachel, p.c.)

Encapsulated by Rachel's comment is what most students valued about their work-based learning experience, namely to *experience* the transition from theory to practice. In other words, students acquired a heightened level of *employability*. Employability may be defined as a person's *capability*, that is, the potential of obtaining and keeping work. Yet at which point is a graduate student employable? Some scholars, notably Pierce (2002) and Knight & Yorke (2004), include actual employment as a key-indicator of employability. Others, meanwhile, understand employability 'as a set of achievements which constitute a necessary but not sufficient condition for the gaining of employment' (Yorke 2004:2). According to the latter view, employability means a graduate's employment-related capability, which requires wider 'core' and 'key' skills derived from complex, work-based learning in addition to disciplinary understanding and skills.

For the purpose of this project, the latter definition of employability is most appropriate, as none of the conference assistants had actually obtained a job in the music or culture industries as a result of their placements. This is what some students wrote one year after completing their WBL placements:

> I am currently an administrative assistant for a finance investment company. My main duties are organising the post, photocopying paperwork, verifying policy documents and data entry. Recently I have been given more tasks such as processing bond purchases and other investment business. I was offered the job through a local agency. I'm not exactly sure how they obtained my details, I assume it must have been for a previous job application. The conference demonstrated the graduate skills I have, such as IT/numeric literacy, team-working, initiative etc, and was also a strong example that I discuss in interviews. Again it has strengthened my graduate skills, however there is nothing that strongly corrolates between the placement and my current role. It has demonstrated my strengths and the standard skills of reliability, hard working, team-worker etc. The conference work has made me keen to enter the events industry directly as a career. However the positions I have applied for required people who have experience of taking sole charge of events, which I lack. An entry-level event job is extremely rare and has so far been unobtainable. I really hope it doesn't sound like I'm belittling the experience, because I really enjoyed it and learnt a lot from it. It just hasn't fully aided me in employment because I have a lot of event assistant experience, but the experience isn't enough for me to obtain more senior roles, and it's extremely hard to gain the roles without previous experience. (Rachel, Facebook message, 22 January 2010)

In February 2010, Aaron wrote about his job situation as follows:

> At the moment I am coming to the end of an agency job as a customer service agent for Natwest. It's generally just answering phones for telephone banking enquiries and admin tasks. I applied through an employment agency, in which I provided details of my placement to support my application. The responsibility I had in the conference provided me with experience in time management and

working as a team. Any work experience is vital to your next role as it allows you to grow and develop your skills. From the conference I was able to strengthen my skills as a team member but being independent to make decisions, manage my time and dedicate to a group outcome...all of which have and continue to be transferable skills in my current role. The placement looks great on a CV, especially because it was paid work as well. Dealing with all the delegates from around the world also improved my social skills which employers inevitably need. My role as a conference assistant has made me more employable, showing my versatility. (Aaron, Facebook message, 1 February 2010).

In April 2010, Cat wrote as follows:

The job situation since leaving uni, the last few months have been a bit hectic. I finally got a job about a month ago after doing quite a lot of voluntary charity-shop work. It is a six month stint doing admin for the Beverley Folk Festival where I live. It is really helping me to gain new skills and also getting me into paid employment. I was also happy that my first job after leaving uni was in the music industry lucky, hey haha!! In regards to the conference and how this helped to get a job, I can tell you that it made me more focused, and definitely helped me when dealing with members of the public which is something that I do on a daily basis. Working with others during the conference proved that I could work within a team and has given me more confidence in my own ideas!! Thanks for being a great lecturer in the time you taught us, and a friend. (Cat, Facebook message, 3 April 2010)

In June 2010, the situation seemed similar, as none of the students seemed to be able to gain a permanent position as a direct result of their WBL placements. Harriet, who completed her degree in media and cultural studies one year after the conference, wrote as follows:

I have been looking for work for over 6 months, and since finishing uni in April I'm still struggling to find any! Trying to remain patient but it's very off putting when you don't hear back. … The ethnomusicology conference assistant position definitely helped with gaining further work placements in my final year, but unfortunately I am struggling to find employment at the moment! … Still on the hunt... I did a lot of work experience during uni but so far the contacts I have made haven't been able to help me. (Email communication by Harriet; 31 May/5 June 2010)

Rachel too wrote more recently that – although she had found a position – she had not yet gained employment in event management:

I'm still working at the investment company as admin, although I was made permament in Feburary. But I'm still wanting a job in events. I volunteered at the Sound City conference a couple of weeks ago doing similar jobs to what I did at the BFE conference on the day, but I haven't been able to make the progression from on-the-day volunteer to being involved long-term. I'm still looking for events jobs, but the majority still want years of high-level experience (i.e. have managed events previously). I applied for an events admin job at the Echo Arena on Tuesday, so fingers cross I hear something good from them. (Rachel, Facebook message, 4 June 2010)

The Value of Work-based Learning: Employability

In the context of this project, the value of work-based learning lies within students' development of skills, knowledge and personal attributes developed in a real work-based learning environment, rather than the acquisition of actual employment. Indeed, knowledge and experience of culture industry practices are important, and the placements were useful for students to experience a real work situation. In our conversation with students, we asked them to present – in a nutshell – the value of work-based learning by listing those skills that are particularly useful in the real world of work. Whilst some skills and attributes come as no surprise, others may be less predictable and are worth pointing out here, including such attributes as *global awareness* (subject-specific knowledge); *ethical and moral responsibility*; and *stress tolerance*.

The following is a summative list of skills and attributes that students mentioned:

Confidence. WBL builds the awareness and belief in one's own ability and self-worth. This self-belief is the basis for initiative and creativity, and thus the autonomous, thinking student.

Commitment. WBL involves a formal learning agreement between student and employer, which can spark feelings of commitment, of not wanting to let someone down. This goes further even into *moral* responsibility.

Communication. WBL often involves people, and thus requires effective communication. In practising communicating with different people, written and aural skills are enhanced.

Creativity. WBL encourages students' creativity and inventiveness. It allows thinking outside of the box, beyond prescribed parameters, to make things happen.

Ethical and moral responsibility: WBL enhances in students a sense of ethical and moral responsibility in their engagement with real people that emerges from treating people with respect, being helpful, friendly and non-patronising.

Initiative. WBL enhances students' sense of initiative, whilst taking independent and responsible decisions to achieve a goal and/or accomplish a task.

Problem-solving. WBL develops the ability to problem-solve, including thinking, researching and finding a solution or alternative to the problem.

Self-awareness and worth. WBL stimulates a feeling of self-awareness and worth for having accomplished something significant.

Social skills. WBL promotes an ability effectively to engage with other people, which involves persuasion, charm and empathy.

Stress tolerance: WBL enables students to negotiate and deal with pressured and stressful situations.

Subject-specific knowledge. WBL extends knowledge in a particular area of work and inspires thinking around that subject matter. Here, *global awareness* was mentioned by students.

Team work. WBL promotes real, thus more meaningful social constructivist learning. It is valuable to work in a team with other people and to achieve something together. It can lead towards democratic attitudes and perspectives towards others.

Time management. WBL enhances effective time management in managing tasks, which also includes punctuality.

Vision. WBL allows to have a long-term vision and to be determined in following this vision.
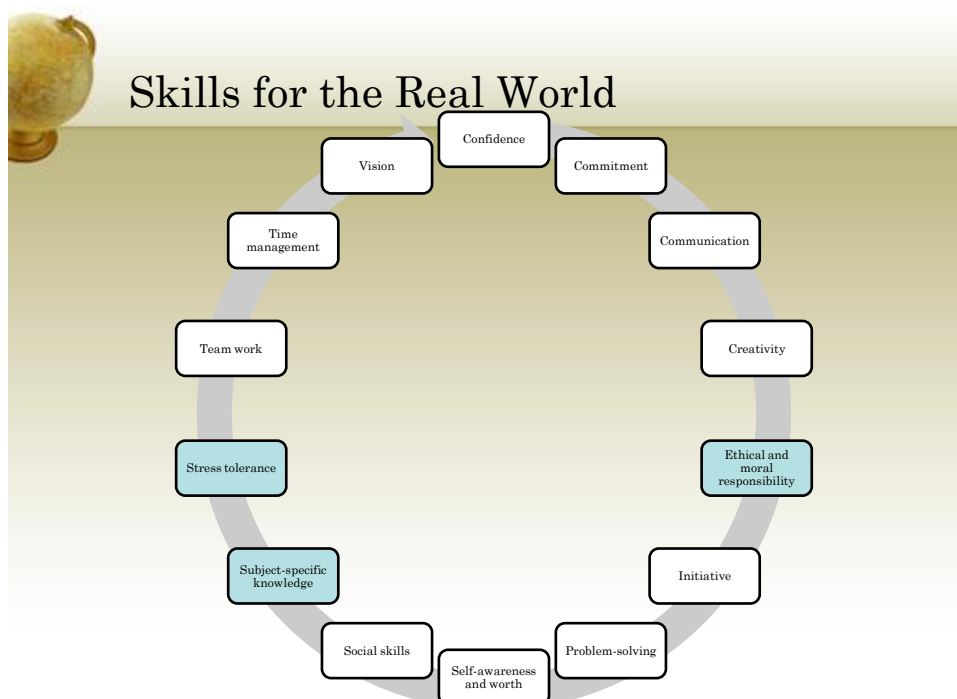
The list includes a range of skills, attributes and expertise, and it appears that WBL led students to better acknowledge these, and in doing so, recognised the relationship between critical self-reflection and employability. Work-based learning enabled students to discover themselves, that is, their own identities as they are shaped by certain attitudes and perceptions, skills and understandings, limits and weaknesses. This critical self-awareness – from experience – is crucial for succeeding in the real world of work. In knowing oneself, a student is more capable to identify and fill voids and gaps in existing practice, and is thus more employable.

Drawing on the insights gained during this research project, the value of work-based learning lies predominantly in the development of employability defined as follows:

> *Employability is a person's critical self-awareness of certain skills, attitudes and understandings that are marked by a person's confidence; commitment; communication; creativity; initiative; problem-solving; self-worth; social skills; stress tolerance; subject-specific knowledge; team work; time management; and vision. Employability is not evoked from the outside, but rather involves a personal, subjective process of self-discovery and self-exploration. Employability can be enhanced through work-based learning in the university setting, but only if WBL provides opportunities for experiential learning within a 'real' and naturalistic setting, and if it facilitates processes of critical self-reflection that lead towards deeper self-awareness of certain skills, attitudes and understandings.*

In conclusion, the work-based learning placements as BFE 2009 Student Conference Assistant enabled students to develop skills relating to arts administration and event management, as well as subject-specific and academic knowledge. The project has shown that students' WBL experiences have an impact on their employability in the music and creative industries, as outlined in this final section, which is evident in students' development and skills and attributes and – most importantly – their ability to acknowledge and recognise these. The impact of WBL thus lies less in the gaining of actual employment, but rather in students' transformations and changes in attitude and perspectives towards themselves and others. Employability is thus a result of personal self-discovery and self-exploration, through which students can better see their values and abilities – and thus their identity – reflected. We hope that this research not only contributes insights into possible ways of studying and understanding students' experiences of work-based learning, and their impact on students' employability, but also new understandings on employability issues within the performing arts more widely.

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