



Encouraging Aston Business School students to reflect on their employment experience

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Summary

The purpose behind this case study is to share with a wider audience of placement officers, tutors and those who are involved in the management of placement students or employment of graduates, the approach taken to encourage reflective learning in undergraduate placement students at Aston Business School.

Reflective learning forms an important foundation of the placement year at Aston Business School, where a professional placement is a mandatory element of the four year degree, for all Home/EU students (optional for International students) who are taking a Single Honours degree (i.e. a fully business programme). The placement year is not compulsory for those students taking a Combined Honours degree (i.e. a degree where two unrelated subjects are studied), although approximately 50% of those students taking an Aston Business School subject opt to take a placement year.

Students spend their year out undertaking a 'proper' job within a company or public sector organisation. They are normally paid a reasonable salary for their work (in 2004/5 the average advertised salary was £13,700 per annum). The placement year is assessed, carrying credits which amount to a contribution of 10% towards the students' final degree. The assessment methods used require the students to submit an academic essay relating theory to practice, a factual report about the company which can be of use to future students, and a log book, the latter being the reflective piece of work.

Encouragement to reflect on the placement year has always been an important feature of Aston Business School's approach to learning. More recently, however, feedback from employers indicated that, although our students have excellent employability skills, "they do not think about them" (Aston Business School Advisory Panel, 2001). We, therefore, began some activities which would encourage students to go beyond the mere acquisition of skills and knowledge. This work became the basis of a programme of introductions to reflective learning, mentoring and awareness of different learning styles written up in Higson and Jones (2002). The idea was to get students used to the idea of reflection on their experiences well before they entered the placement year.

Objectives

The Aston Business School placement year carries a set of explicit, robust learning objectives:

- a) To benefit from the integration of University study and work experience in ways which facilitate critical reflection on each;
- b) To experience the responsibilities, tasks, and relationships involved in managerial work at a level appropriate to a third year undergraduate student in a Business School;
- c) Where students are specialising in a particular functional or professional area, to gain greater practical understanding of their chosen specialism;

- d) To gain an understanding of the ways in which their placement organisation operates and how this might relate to other organisations and management processes;
- e) To build a personal awareness of their own interests, competencies, values and potential;
- f) To develop the ability to share their work experience and evaluations with their peers and with academic staff in order to gain more from their final year of study and to assist others to do likewise;
- g) To increase their ability to make informed career choices.

The log book's objective is as a developmental piece of work, rather than as an academic assignment, aiming to meet the objectives b-e (possibly also objective a).

Rationale

The log book is the students' record of their development during the placement year. It is a tool for students to use to reflect upon their experiences, opportunities, aims and objectives, and to encourage critical evaluation of their achievements.

According to Christine Fanthome (2004), "although the practical and cultural skills that can be acquired in the workplace are very important, arguably an even more valuable aspect of work placement experience is the opportunity it offers for reflective development and analysis...students can hone the technique of critical reflection that is fundamental to developing the skill of organising one's own learning..." and furthermore "in contemporary society, the notion of "lifelong learning" has superseded the view that education ends after school or university" (p.4-5).

In 2004, the Rt. Hon. Alan Johnson MP, then Minister of State for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education, gave the keynote address at the 2004 Association for Sandwich Education and Training (ASET) Annual Conference, at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge. He stated that "but whatever HE qualifications students are aiming to achieve, let's not forget life skills. Again, we have listened to the pleas of employers, to their repeated requests that each and every young person brings to a job these skills which may be less tangible but are nevertheless essential. Skills like initiative, leadership and problem solving, that employers so often inform us are so often lacking in even the most highly qualified and gifted of graduates." The reflective practice that Aston Business School placement students undertake enables them to explore more deeply the experiences they have been exposed to (and actively sought out) during the course of a professional placement year and can help to reveal skills such as those outlined by the Rt. Hon. Alan Johnson.

For the purposes of this article, a definition of reflective practice should be offered -

"Reflection, if managed in an ordered way, can provide great opportunities for learning, understanding and clarifying thought, both in one's personal life and in learning and professional development." (Moon, 1999).

Aston Business School supports the view of Moon; essentially, by giving students a framework upon which to pin their reflections, this can aid an often difficult and ultimately challenging process – that of critical self-reflection and analysis.

Context

In 2004/5, 406 Aston Business School students embarked upon the placement year as part of their degree programme of study. The School's Placement Office has links with over 800 employers, across the world. Students are employed by organisations which span employment sectors and the globe. This year they are in the UK, of

course, but also Italy, France, Germany, the Netherlands, the USA, China and Belgium. The range of countries where placement contacts and partners exist has been expanded quite significantly recently and 2005/6 will see students undertaking placements in Canada, India, Greece, Brazil, Sweden, and Hong Kong as well as with companies in the countries outlined previously.

The intercultural experiences of students working for global organisations, offer opportunities for personal and professional development, as shown by the written reflections set out by students in their log books. With this in mind, along with the phenomenon of culture shock, Aston Business School equips students for the intercultural learning dimension of their placement year, through sessions on international placements, and, more specifically, through an online intercultural training package. Aspects of the course are delivered through a web-based system, complemented with face to face interactions – for example, role play with French and German nationals. One of the many aims of this training is that it can help students to make better sense of their new experiences and learnings.

The Foundations of Management module, delivered in year one to all Aston Business School students, includes lectures and workshops on reflective learning. The learning outcomes of this module are:

- An idea of what reflective learning is
- An understanding of how reflective learning is important to their studies
- An understanding of the importance of a reflective approach to managers
- An introduction to how the topic will be explored in tutorials

Students are encouraged to appreciate the differences between “surface learning” and “deep learning”(Fry et al), with those involved in deep learning being individuals who:

- Have ideas that change
- Regard information flexibly
- Question materials
- Hold ideas that are linked
- Are active
- Are able to retrieve information
- Have concern for meaning
- Have wide views of a topic
- Compares and contrasts
- Consider ideas which conflict
- Transform information.

Description

Aston Business School's Placement Office introduced a log book as part of its assessment of the students' placement year several years ago. This was initially graded on a pass/fail basis but more recently, this marking scheme was adapted to include “merit” and “distinction” ratings too, to reward those students who fully engage with this piece of work and who demonstrate that they have developed the ability to self-reflect. Certificates are awarded to the students on the basis of this achievement.

The log book requires the students to keep records of their experiences and how these link to their learning, thus developing their ability to be critical and reflective. The structure of the log book is as follows:

Section One: Framework

Here, the students put together a framework for their placement employment upon its commencement. The students arrange a meeting with their placement supervisor, to discuss and agree a framework for the placement. During this process, they are advised to address, at least, the following basic questions:

- What is your role in the organisation? What will this entail? What are your responsibilities?
- What are you aiming to achieve?
- What personal skills do you wish to develop/gain?
- How will your progress be appraised by your supervisor?
- What training/learning/development opportunities will be provided?

The meeting is then documented by the student, and they and their manager sign this record – this then completes Section One of the log book and sets a framework for the placement year.

Section Two: Regular Reflections

This section of the log book is written over the course of the placement year, month by month.

Students meet with their Placement Supervisors regularly during the placement year – this may be frequently during the early stages (i.e. daily, weekly) and then perhaps less frequently as they settle into their role (but ideally monthly).

The meetings should enable the student to:

- gain feedback from their Placement Supervisor on their performance
- reflect on what they have achieved and how
- reflect on any difficulties that they have encountered, highlighting any particular problems or areas of difficulty there might be and agreeing what could be done to resolve these
- decide on a course of action for the next stage of the placement, taking into account progress so far

Students are advised that such meetings will be more effective for all parties if they prepare for them thoroughly beforehand. The following checklist is provided to assist the process:

- reflecting on what you have been doing
- how you have done it
- identify problems, constraints and opportunities
- what went well?
- what went badly?
- who helped you?
- what obstacles did you face?

- how did you overcome these?
- what have you achieved?
- what have you learnt?
- do you feel as if your skills have been developed? In what way?
- would you change your approach if faced with a similar situation in the future? How?

Each meeting is then recorded by the student as a monthly entry in Section Two of the log book. At the end of the placement year, each student's log book should normally contain 12 entries for Section Two – one for each month of the placement. They may, however, include more entries, if the student or his or her supervisor or tutor thought that more regular meetings were required.

Each of the monthly entries should include comments on:

- the activities the student has been involved in
- reflection on any problems they faced and what action they took to try to resolve the issue
- their learning – they should also reflect on the skills and knowledge gained, and any personal development from the experiences
- an outline of their objectives for the next month
- the supervisor's signature, comments, if appropriate and the date
- their signature and date

Students are encouraged to include additional entries. For example, if the placement company has an appraisal process, the reports or documents from appraisal meetings could be incorporated into the log book as these are complementary reflective processes.

Reflection is often highly personal and students are advised that they may write about a particular event or learning situation for a second time, perhaps at a later date, after their supervisor has signed off the original entry for that month. Students are reassured that this is acceptable in those situations where they wish to write very openly and honestly – perhaps about a personal situation or an event involving the supervisor, for example. In these circumstances, students are encouraged to submit both the original signed entry and the second version.

Section Three: Summary

The final section of the log book is a summary of what the students feel they have individually gained from the placement in terms of skills, new learning, knowledge, experience, training, etc. This is the overall, holistic reflection on their placement – what have they learnt? How have they developed as a person? What skills have they gained? How have they developed as a student?

They evaluate their performance against the objectives outlined in Section One and are asked to reflect on whether these objectives were met. Did they develop further than anticipated? We encourage the students not to worry if they did not meet all of the aims and objectives they set out to achieve in Section One; they are not penalised when the summary is reviewed by a tutor, but we do ask them to reflect on and comment upon why they did not meet these goals.

We give students examples of this kind of development:

- You may find that you can now quite happily deal with a task which would have worried you at the outset of your placement. (Answering queries over the telephone perhaps.) How do you think you acquired this new-found confidence or expertise?
- Think of a mistake you made in your work or a situation that did not go to plan. Having the advantage of hindsight, how would you react to a similar situation now? What has this experience taught you?
- Have you encountered an especially difficult or tricky situation or experience at work? How did you cope with it? What was the outcome? What did this experience teach you about the best way to deal with these sorts of situations? Did you learn anything about yourself and your working relationships through this experience?
- Have you any problem in getting on with or being accepted by any individual in your workplace? Why do you think this might have been and how have you dealt with it? Has this difficulty helped to develop your interpersonal communication skills, understanding, tact, insight, etc?

Aston Business School's degrees are accredited by a number of professional bodies, including:

- The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
- Association of Chartered Certified Accountants in England and Wales
- Chartered Institute of Marketing
- Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy
- Chartered Institute of Management Accountants
- The Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales
- The Institute of Chartered Accountants in Scotland
- The Institute of Chartered Secretaries and Administrators
- Chartered Insurance Institute.

For students who embark on professional careers and develop their membership levels within these professional bodies, the skill of reflective practice is essential. For example, CIPD members are required to practice and be able to demonstrate continuing professional development in order to upgrade their membership. Members complete an application form which states "the important aspect here is that you are able to reflect on your learning and show how you have added value in a professional capacity" (CIPD, 2005).

As a developmental piece of coursework the log book echoes and supports the notion propounded by Fanthome (2004), "You are most likely to learn from your work placement if you spend some time reflecting upon each aspect of it, and particularly if you then analyse your response and reaction to the various situations you encounter and think through how your behaviour and performance could be improved" (p.4-5).

Alongside the briefing given to students as they commence their placement, the workplace supervisor has an important role to play in the development of the students' reflective ability. The supervisor is asked to assist the student in compiling his or her log book and to sign off the log at the end of each month. As well as developing reflective skills, the log also facilitates joint objective setting, the regular review of these goals and generally ensuring that developmental dialogue occurs

regularly between supervisor and student. Many organisations' existing performance appraisal schemes dovetail with meeting some requirements of the log.

As stated earlier, employers' feedback to Aston Business School indicated that they believed students were not spending time thinking about the skills they have or need. An employer who recruited one student into a housing association on a 12 month professional placement, for example, felt as a placement supervisor that, "The monthly log was very useful feedback for me so I could appreciate some of the thoughts and problems the student may have had."

Each student has a placement tutor, who, along with visiting the student (and his or her supervisor) whilst on placement, also provides academic guidance, and will "liaise with the student throughout the year by whatever method is appropriate to help their development and maximise learning opportunities" (Aston Business School Placement Briefing Pack 2005/6).

This reflective approach is now being further developed via the university-wide scheme for Personal Development Plans (PDPs). A total of 130 students from across the four schools at Aston University, and all years, participated in the 2004/5 pilot project on a voluntary basis. Among them were nine ABS placement students.

The PDP used in the pilot contained a skills audit and a reflective log. The briefing to students on the reflective log in the pack stated that it is "a process of thinking about your experiences on a week by week basis. You consider how you responded to the tasks performed, how you interact with your fellow students or colleagues, what progress you make, what strategies you employ and if you need to modify them, and how all this relates to your personal development." (Thompson, 2004. p6).

The personal element in reflection was recognised, and in the materials provided to students for the PDP pilot, the author commented on personal feelings "this is often one of the main differences between your university studies and this type of learning. In this PDP you are allowed to reflect in a personal way ... It is ok to say "I" or "my"! Discussing personal attitudes is a way of unravelling your responses and discovering your strengths and weaknesses." (Thompson 2004, p17).

The pilot was completed in May 2005, and was evaluated through an online questionnaire with 29 questions, completed by 50 students. A number of questions related to reflection and asked students about their reactions and thoughts on this process throughout the PDP and also their perceptions of reflection and the need to reflect, and how they went about this.

Students were asked "Why did you volunteer to do this PDP?", one student responded that it would "help reflective thinking."

Responses to the question "Did you find the template provided to help you be more reflective useful?" included:

It helped me reflect on my experiences, and aided my understanding of my strengths and weaknesses in dealing with particular situations.

I could look back at things, which then helped with the monthly reviews.

It made me understand myself more.

It was useful when completing coursework, learning from past errors.

This was particularly useful as I had an unsuccessful placement and rather than dwell on the negative aspects it helped me to see instead not only what I was learning but where I was going wrong.

I was able to reflect on my week critically and highlight some areas of concern. I was able to reflect upon how I could deal with certain situations in the future. It

also made me think about what I had learnt and areas that I haven't learnt and would like to.

Students were also asked "What was the most positive aspect of undertaking the PDP?" Responses to this included:

The reflective thought it provided.

Having some structure to base my reflective diary on.

To see how skills can develop.

The reflective log.

What you learn and how you apply it to your work.

Help us to achieve our goal, more specific, and think critically.

It actually helps you to structure your development and the recording of the progress of that development.

I am able to think about what I have learned from each experience. It motivated me towards a better self.

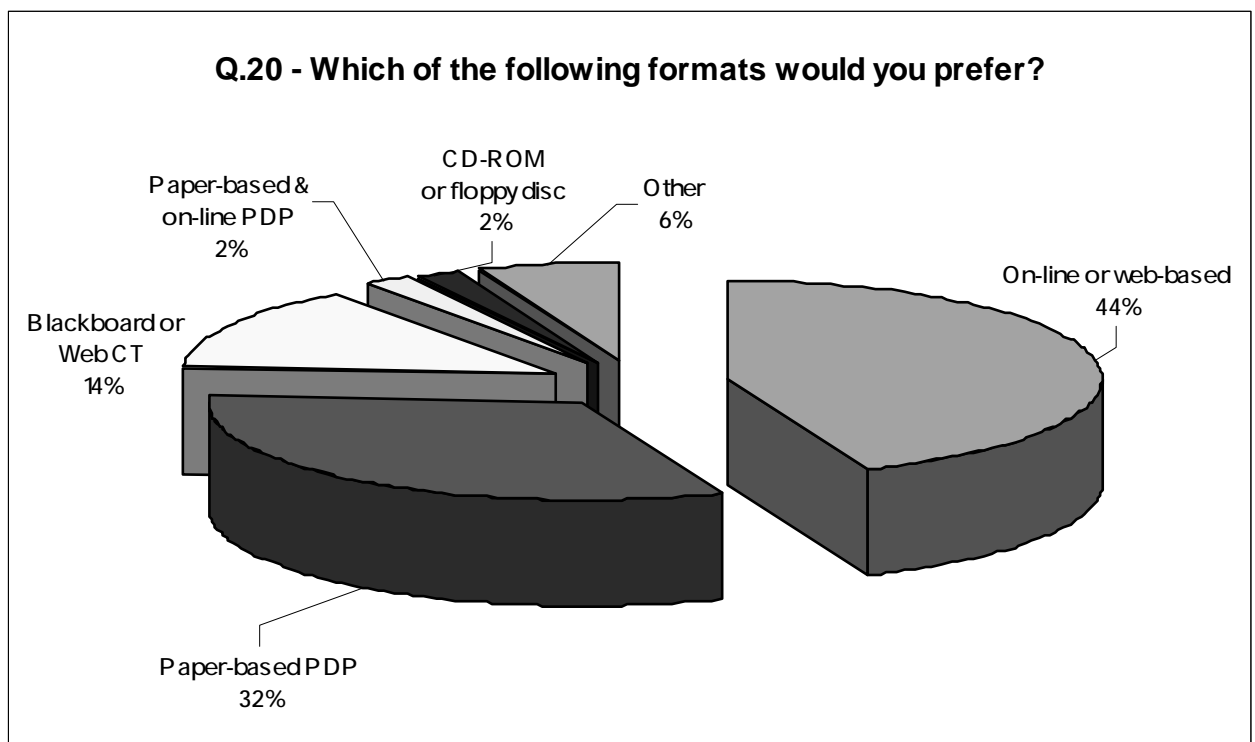
Being able to look back and see how I have developed, throughout the year.

Being able to see just how much I had achieved during the year.

It allowed me to critically reflect on my placement to write up my log book.

We are hoping that the feedback will enable us to combine the Personal Development Plan with the Reflective Learning Journal. At the same time, perhaps it could be presented to students in electronic form, rather than paper form – or even both. The research undertaken by Thompson asked students which format they preferred the PDP to be available in. The results are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1



Almost half of the students surveyed indicated a preference for an online or web-based means of completing the PDP.

With technology being used to great advantage by Aston Business School's Placement Office in other areas of student support (i.e. Blackboard™, a placement intranet, and discussion boards), the use of technology in the development of the log book will be looked at in more detail in the near future.

Discussion

All students who went on placement in 2003/4, were asked about their placement when they returned to university in October 2004. The survey showed that some students felt that the advice given to them on the log book was insufficient: "more information on log book should be available"; "More straight forward guidelines for the log book"; "more detail on each piece of coursework"; "examples of log books should be made available" and "the placement report and log book should count towards final year grade".

Students on placement in 2004/5 have benefited from the use of the Blackboard™ Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). A placements module has been developed which incorporates the functionality of student discussion boards. These boards facilitate student discourse, along with offering quick access to a member of the placements team, with whom students can raise queries. A range of topics have been discussed through the boards, including the issues surrounding writing up their log books.

Key questions posed on the discussion boards from July 2004 to April 2005 relate to students' unease with writing in the first person; writing descriptively and not reflectively; simply not recording experiences at source, and so on.

Anecdotal feedback and evidence from Placement Tutors also suggests that students are more challenged by the log than by a 5000 word academic essay linking theory to practice.

A further barrier for some is the need to involve their supervisor – supervisors are required to sign off the monthly entries. As a development piece rather than an academic one, the log book facilitates regular discussions between the student and their employer; this means that in even the busiest of commercial enterprises, the supervisor has an obligation to support the student's development and learning and this is underpinned by the log book. However, this does not always occur, for some of the following reasons:

- the student has not developed a relationship with their employer
- the student wishes to write about an incident involving the supervisor
- the student feels that the level of reflection is too personal and they do not wish their supervisor to read this piece
- the supervisor does not make time for these developmental meetings

Whilst the nature of the reflective process is personal, the involvement of the supervisor helps to support the agreed framework and provides further credence; confirmation that the learning and development activities the student has described and reflected upon have taken place.

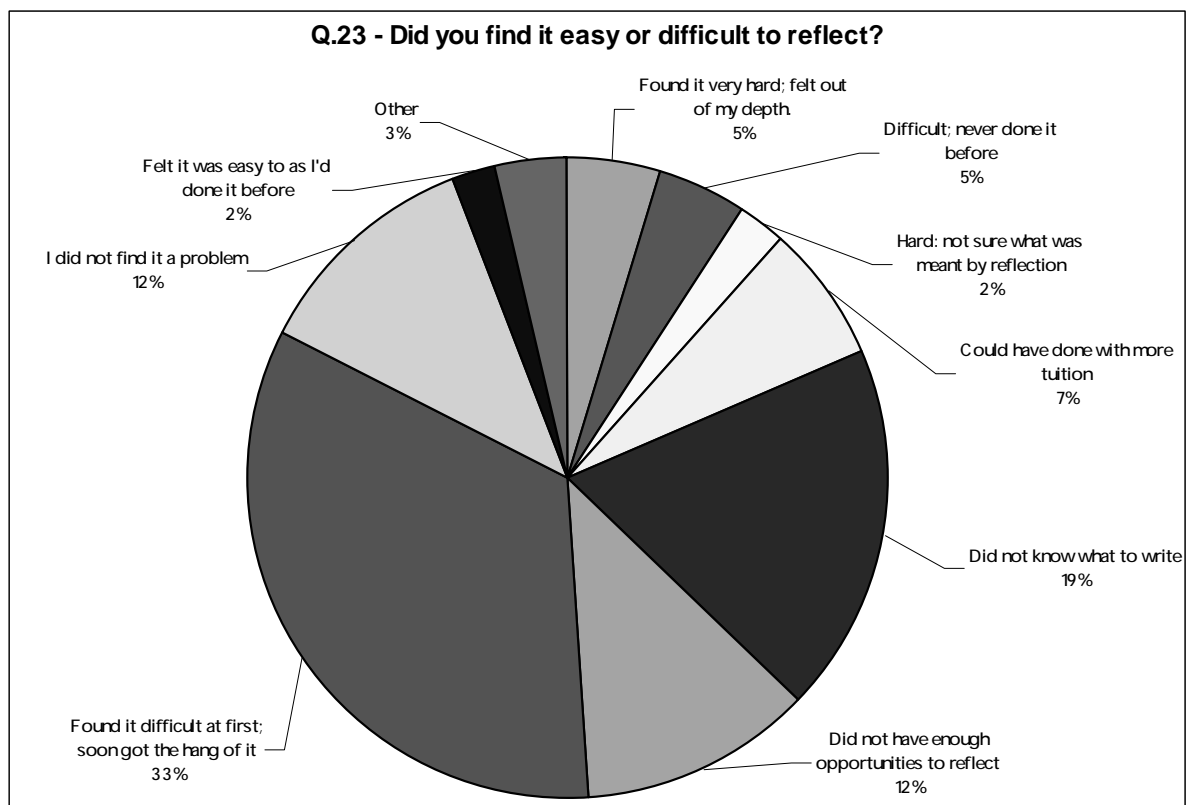
With a range of intrinsically linked issues, the log book (as a piece of coursework) has been examined. The information provided to students in their Placement Year Briefing Pack was scrutinised. It was felt that some of the information could be ambiguous. Some students were also mis-interpreting the guidance provided, which led to too many descriptive pieces being written and submitted – in other words,

students were “logging” their activities and were not spending enough time identifying the learning which had actually taken place and therefore had not undertaken any or little reflection on it. For students embarking on their placement for the academic year 2005/6, we decided to revise the title of this piece of placement year coursework: “Log Book” will become “Reflective Learning Journal.” We acted on students’ feedback and feedback from tutors involved in marking the log. We believe that effecting a simple change in the title of the piece will be an important step in making the concept of reflection a much more explicit and tangible practice. This seemingly cosmetic change was backed up by structural changes and clearer guidance on what being reflective is and what it involves. Furthermore, extensive reading was carried out by the authors on reflection, reflective learning, and the use and value of log books and journals in learning. Staff training was undertaken through attending a course on reflective learning – this will allow better guidance to be offered to students. In addition, the personal and professional experiences of the authors through continuing professional development in their individual fields, has allowed a deeper insight into reflective practice and ways in which this life skill can be developed.

Overall, we felt that some students demonstrated either a lack of ability or willingness to engage wholeheartedly with the task. The term “log book”, for some, conjured up the notion of the piece as descriptive i.e. literally logging what they did, what happened, despite the instructions provided to students. Critical self reflection was being carried out to only a basic level by some students.

The difficulties associated with reflection were also experienced by students who took part in the PDP pilot. Participants were asked “Did you find it easy or difficult to reflect?” See Figure 2. Only 14% of students surveyed stated that they had found it easy or not problematic.

Figure 2



The structure for the Reflective Learning Journal outlined in the Discussion section shows the revised information which has been prepared for the Placement Year Briefing Pack, and this has been presented to students (and tutors and supervisors) undertaking their placement in 2005/6.

The new cohort of student placements will commence throughout the summer of 2005; therefore, at the time of writing this article, there is as yet no structured feedback on the success of the implementation of the revision. Feedback will be sought using the suggested following methods:

- the discussion boards on Blackboard™ will be monitored for frequently asked questions relating to the Reflective Learning Journal during the course of the placement year;
- tutor input will be actively sought as the placement year progresses, for example, through the placement visits they undertake and the reports written by placement tutors on each student – these are reviewed by the Placements Manager, with action taken as necessary;
- an evaluation questionnaire will be issued to all students at the end of the placement year and feedback will be sought on the placement year coursework, including the journal, along with input from the students on their thoughts on the guidelines for this piece of work contained in their Briefing Pack;
- a sample of company supervisors will be contacted during the year and their input on the Reflective Learning Journal will be sought.

The broader aims of the project in the future are to further the development of reflective practice activities and to encourage reflection to be undertaken by students across the four years of the undergraduate degree programme, and not solely during the placement year. The art of reflection should become a truly integral part of the student experience when studying for an undergraduate degree at Aston Business School. As stated previously, this could be combined with the PDP project development, so that being a reflective thinker becomes part of the approach of our students from the first year and therefore indicate a shift in culture. As professionals are required to go through the process of stepping back from their daily work with some regularity for continuing professional development purposes, we too are striving for this to become simply part of what our students do – ultimately, better preparing them for seeking graduate employment, and indeed, professional life.

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