



Preparing Aston Business School students for placement

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Summary

Aston Business School (ABS) has offered four-year sandwich degrees (including a year long placement) for over 30 years, and ABS has often been ranked top for graduate employability. This report outlines the activities ABS uses to meet its ever increasing placement targets.

ABS builds relationships in students' thinking between theory and practice, and this has implications for their study, the placement period and beyond. Developing the links has certainly been a factor in the enhanced employability of ABS graduates, resulting in ABS having been ranked top for graduate employability for many years.

The eight employability skills used as the basis for the placement preparation objectives originate from Smith et al's (2002) work on employability. We were encouraged to find that these employability skills overlap with the benchmark of the 'Profile summary for Business and Management' outlined by Hawkridge (2005).

In this case study we provide a rationale and then the objectives of the placement preparation period, followed by specific details of the preparation process. The evaluation highlights key achievements and areas for development, and the discussion is future-focused.

Readers should note that the ABS Undergraduate curriculum is aimed at preparing students for employment but this case study focuses on the role of the Placements Team.

Rationale

The key role of the ABS Placements Team is to place second year undergraduate (UG) business students within organisations. Work placements can be viewed as a win-win situation, with employers having the chance to 'road test' potential recruits and enabling ABS to maintain its excellent links with industry. The current commercial environment, characterised by increased levels of competition, is leading recruiters to seek employees who will be both effective and efficient (Taylor, 2003). Taylor describes the main goal of organisations participating in graduate recruitment as "...reaching that elusive creature – the well-qualified, well-motivated, intelligent, energetic and mobile graduate with management potential" (p.150).

It is up to ABS to prepare students to meet the above criteria and enable students to market themselves effectively throughout the selection process.

Objectives

The broad performance measure for the Placements Team is the number of students who secure high quality placements. However, this would be a somewhat short-term and mechanistic objective. There is also a need for more intangible and long term measures

to be used as the placement preparation period also seeks to prepare students to fulfill the Learning Objectives outlined below once on placement. And beyond this, the preparatory stage should also positively influence the first graduate destination, the position five years on and an individual's potential in the work place throughout working life.

Learning objectives for students on placement

- (a) to benefit from the integration of University study and work experience in ways which facilitate critical reflection on each of these aspects;
- (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 experiences 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.

To have an opportunity to fulfil these objectives, students must develop skills during the placement search. The eight employability skills (skills beyond subject knowledge), outlined by Smith et al (2002), offer the starting point for the team's objectives during the placement preparation period:

- *Skills (1) Team working, (2) Independent working & (3) Working without direct supervision* are skills which all students will have had the opportunity to develop prior to commencing their placement search, all three being embedded in the curriculum. The role of ABS lies in encouraging self-reflection and skills analysis so that students are equipped to identify examples of where these skills have been developed in order to market themselves effectively. As Rhodes asserts (2004), *"Any experience is experience; the key is to reflect on what has been achieved so these achievements can be articulated."*
- *Skills (4) Business awareness and (5) An understanding of the world of work* are vital. Students must develop an ability to recognise the key issues facing organisations plus a knowledge of how they can add-value and the part they will play in helping companies to meet current and future challenges. As selection procedures become increasingly sophisticated and employers' expectations rise, this area is highlighted as a weakness among undergraduates, who often have limited industrial experience.
- *Skill (6) Communication* is developed through curricular and extra-curricular activities both written and verbal communication are crucial elements in the students' success. Effective communication must always follow from a thorough self-analysis plus an understanding of the business context in order to prove

clear links between the candidate and the post, but students often struggle to identify these links and articulate them.

- *Skill (7) Planning one's own development* includes planning one's development around any skills gaps which become apparent prior to securing a placement: the gaps may be limited work experience, for example, or poor interview technique. But employers also seek students who are proactive and are able to seek out opportunities once on placement.
- *Skill (8) Job-search* is an important focus throughout the placement preparation as students learn key sources for placements and how to assess a match between their skills/competences and those required by an employer.

Context

The ABS Placements Team comprises three full-time staff who manage the placements process, from student preparation to employer relations. The team successfully placed over 400 students in 2004/2005, and figures for 2005/2006 indicate that over 550 students are registered as seeking a placement. This figure includes Single Honours students, and Combined Honours students (those who combine business with study of another subject). There is a high percentage of International students, averaging 21% across ABS UG programmes for 2004/5; they have a variety of differing needs which the team also aims to meet.

The current context is changing; with the introduction of student tuition fees and impending higher fees we feel a student-centric approach is vital so that students feel confident that they are receiving a high level service. Competition is fierce, with increasing numbers of institutions now offering industrial placement opportunities. This is in part in response to the Dearing Report, which asserted that 'global competitiveness requires that education and training should enable people to compete with the best. It is recommended that all institutions should identify opportunities to increase the extent to which programmes help students to become familiar with work and support them in reflecting upon such experiences.' (cited in Booth 2002 p6).

In addition, the CIPD Quarterly Labour Market Outlook (Spring 2005) indicates a substantial negative balance (23%) of employers expecting to employ fewer people by spring 2006 over those expecting to employ more people, demonstrating a deviation from previous years' trends.

The above factors have influenced the level of assistance and support students have required in order to secure good quality placements in an increasingly challenging labour market, and will continue to do so .

Description

Table 1 outlines the main activities students are offered to meet the programme objectives from the first year up to their successful placement year.

Table 1. Placement Preparation, Main Activities

Timing	Activity	Skills Objectives Met	Target Audience
Second Term	1 st Year Counselling	7	1 st Years
Second Term	2 nd Year Counselling	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8	2 nd Years

First Term	Placements Fair	4,5,7,8	1 st & 2 nd Years
Continuous	Placements Website	8	2 nd Years
Continuous	Resources Room	2,3,4,5,7,8,	2 nd Years
First Term	Timetabled sessions (2 identical sessions run each week) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Week 2 – Briefing Session o Week 3 – CV/Cover Letters o Week 4 – Application Forms (employers present) o Week 5 – Interviews (employers present) o Week 6 - Assessment Centres (1): Overall Process (employers present) o Week 7 – Assessment Centres (2): Psychometric Tests/Presentations 	2,3,4,5,7,8	2 nd years
First Term	Student Charter	2,3,7	2 nd years
First Term	Employer Presentations & Practical Sessions	4,5	2 nd years
First Term	International Student Session	5,7,8	International 2 nd years
Second Term	International Placement Opportunities Session	4,5,7	2 nd Years
First Term	Mentoring Scheme	5,7	2 nd Years (particularly International Students)
Continuous	One to one support	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,	2 nd years
Continuous	Surgery Sessions	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8	2 nd Years
Several sessions each term	Psychometric Test Sessions	8	2 nd years
End of First Term	Tracking sheet plus provisional feedback in order to inform 2 nd term activities	7	2 nd years
Continuous	Email Contact		2 nd years
Second Term	'Finding Own Placement' session	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8	2 nd years planning to conduct their own search
Third Term	'Send Off' meetings	4,5,7	2 nd years who are successfully placed
Third Term	Briefing Pack	2,3,5,7	2 nd years who are successfully placed
Third Term	Summer Scheme	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8	2 nd years who are still to secure their placement
September	Motivation Event	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8	2 nd years who are still to secure their placement

First Year Counselling

The counselling session aims to demystify the placement process for the first year students, plus provide practical guidance on how students can start to prepare for their placement from this early stage. This session begins to focus students thoughts on their own development.

Second Year Counselling

This session is designed to answer the more specific queries that second years will have as they go through the placement search process. It allows further one to one guidance, which students value, and a chance to address students' specific queries.

Placements Fair

The Placement Fair takes place annually in November; the format enables students to speak to final years about their placement experiences, providing students with an understanding of the world of work, plus practical guidance on job searching skills.

The Fair is split into three main zones:

1. **Functional Zone**, where final year students represent their organisations and functional areas; this zone includes representatives from voluntary organisations and SMEs to assist in raising the profile of these important opportunities.
2. **Skills Zone**, where students are helped to forge and strengthen links with both internal and external representatives, thus raising the profile of the ABS placements scheme, and highlighting the many opportunities students have to develop further their skills prior to and during their placement search.
3. **International Zone**, split into two main areas. First, the team felt that successful role models who had completed their overseas placements would be critical in this zone given the increased numbers of international students. Second, because more and more students, domestic and overseas in origin, enquire about placements overseas, the international zone contains a plethora of information about overseas placements.

Placements Website

All placement positions from September to June are advertised on a website that enables students to search by criteria such as location and function. All events throughout the placement search period are advertised here too.

The website contains comprehensive advice sheets relating to the major selection techniques, plus advice on how students should search for their own placements. Student profiles and placement reports provide the students with an insight into the roles and companies available from the perspective of past placement students. A 'links page' gives students instant access to sites they may find useful, such as Doctor Job, Hobsons, or Fledglings.

The Placements Website also offers a tracking facility. This is used to identify students whose level of activity is deemed low, enabling barriers to be addressed early on in the placement search process.

The website in many ways limits the extent to which students are required to develop independent job search skills, but due to increased competition ABS is placing the emphasis is more and more on students seeking their own placement.

Resources Room

This is a dedicated environment where students have all the resources they require for a successful placement search: PCs, printer, hard copies of placement reports and company literature. It is open during normal office hours and students also have access to the Placements Team five days a week.

Timetabled Sessions

The first session sets the scene for the academic year, outlining the resources available plus the process students need to follow. This is also the point where the 'Student Charter' is introduced, which sets out expectations from the start, encouraging students to undertake independent working, begin reflecting on what they have achieved to date in order to plan their future development and voice their achievements and experiences effectively to employers.

The sessions which follow cover the major selection techniques and, in order to provide a 'real world' perspective, representatives from recruiting organisations are invited to outline how they select students. These sessions undoubtedly increase students' business awareness and enable them to hone their job searching skills to match employer requirements.

Employer presentations & practical sessions

Many employers visit the campus for company presentations and practical workshops. This benefits both students and employers, as the students receive credible guidance and the employers have an opportunity to promote their schemes. Students can gain an insight into organisations they plan to apply.

International student session

ABS has many international students, with additional and differing needs. This session offers guidance on translating grades from home countries, visa and fee implications of taking a placement and how best to gain work experience. International students must understand clearly the placement search process and the role that effective written and spoken communications will play in securing their placement.

International placement opportunities session

Students are increasingly interested in working overseas and with over 100 international positions advertised so far this year it is essential that students should have a thorough understanding of how they should approach the selection process, including the procedures and preparations that working overseas will entail. The session includes talks from students who have successfully completed an overseas placement.

Mentoring session

The mentor scheme offers second year students direct contact with the returning final year students. The process is managed informally and allows students to gain in-depth advice and guidance from students who have worked in organisations/functions they are interested in.

One-to-one support

Appointment slots are available to students daily and provide a valuable opportunity for students' specific queries to be addressed. Appointments cover a wide variety of areas, including:

- Advising on skills audits and matching skills/competences to positions
- Mock interviews
- Practising presentation skills
- Assessment centre advice
- Students' own placement searches
- Career guidance
- Psychometric test guidance

Surgery sessions

One-to-one student appointments get booked up very quickly so drop-in surgery sessions are also provided to make optimum use of resources. Surgery sessions focus on 'hot topics' at given points throughout the placement cycle, allowing current queries to be addressed. As with the one-to-one appointments, specific student queries dictate the objectives which the surgery sessions aim to meet.

Psychometric test sessions

Among employers, 27% use general ability tests and 23% use some form of numerical/verbal psychometric testing in their selection process (CIPD Survey, 2004). It is, therefore, helpful for students to gain experience in order to demystify the tests and assist them in performing to their optimum level when faced with the test proper. In addition to having a focused timetabled session on testing students are also invited to sit the psychometric tests which are used most commonly by employers within undergraduate recruitment, followed by a 15-minute feedback session where they are advised on their current performance and actions they can take to increase their chances of success during their placement search.

These sessions have been an excellent addition to the offering within ABS, because psychometric tests often worry students and with limited experience prior to sitting the tests during a selection process students will often not perform to their full potential. As two members of the team are BPS (British Psychological Society) Level A qualified (i.e. the minimum qualification required to administer and feedback on psychometric tests) advice and guidance can be given in addition to practice tests.

Student tracking and feedback exercise

With such high numbers of students it is important that students' progress and activity levels are monitored rigorously, in order to keep down the numbers of 'late placed' students. Students are issued with a tracking and feedback form. Their feedback directly informs activities over the following terms, allowing resources to be channelled effectively. The form (and the placements website) also provides the Placements Team with information on who is least active. Those students who do not appear to be looking for placements are then contacted and any difficulties are addressed.

Email communications

This is one of the key tools used throughout the placement search period. It allows the team to inform students of new opportunities and services, but perhaps most importantly to remain in constant contact with a large number of students and help motivate them.

'Finding own placement' session

This session was first offered in direct response to the tracking exercise. It covers areas such as identifying opportunities, networking, speculative letters and personal PR, all of which seek to meet the programme's objectives. In addition, as a large part of the Placements Team's role is to motivate and equip students to find their own positions, it is a vehicle for doing so. Competition is fierce, therefore pursuing one's own opportunities and taking responsibility is high on ABS' agenda.

'Send off' meetings

Students are invited to attend a 'Send off' meeting prior to commencing their placement. The meeting aims to equip students with the information they need for a productive placement experience. The following topics are covered:

- Employer, student and university expectations
- Finances including tuition fees, tax, national insurance, council tax etc
- Keeping in touch with university/fellow students
- Employment legislation
- Health & safety information
- How to deal with any problems
- How Blackboard (VLE) can support students
- The role of the Placement Tutor
- Assessment requirements and deadlines
- Final year accommodation, module options and outlines.

Placement year briefing pack

During the 'Send off' meeting students receive a briefing pack. This provides detailed information on the learning objectives of the year, the assessment package, students' key responsibilities, key contact details plus brief information on finances, fees, health and safety and other employment legislation.

Summer scheme

At the end of June the placement website closes and the system changes to that of a recruitment agency. The Placements Team members work closely with students and employers to match students to vacancies. The scheme benefits students who are late in securing their placement, as well as employers who have additional or late requirements.

All unplaced students are invited to attend a workshop session that identifies their skills gaps and equips them with the information and practical skills they require for their placement search, but perhaps most importantly this session prepares students to work independently, with no direct supervision.

Motivation event

In early September, about three months of the Summer Scheme those students who remain unplaced are invited to attend a motivation event. The invitation process requests feedback on any areas in which the students are still struggling and the session is designed specifically to meet their needs.

Common areas covered are as follows:

- Job search activities (practical group work)
- Time planning (examples of a well utilised week)
- Cold calling (role play)
- Networking and identifying opportunities (group brain storm plus positive examples from previous student)
- Interview skills (students see the process from the interviewers' perspective as they sit on a mock interview panel)
- Personal PR

We require students to prepare beforehand so that the four hour workshop is as productive as possible.

Evaluation

Student feedback

A main evaluation tool used to assess the above activities is the 'Student Evaluation Questionnaire', distributed at the end the students' placement; for 2003/4 the response rate was 37%. Students are asked to reflect on their placement experience and the preparation period.

Table 2 shows students' ratings of the services offered by the Placements Team in 2003/4. There are no data for some 2004/5 activities described above as these were developed in direct response to feedback received in 2003/4.

Table 2. Students' evaluation of the Placement Process 2003/4

Service Type	% of respondents rating services as Excellent or Good
Placements website	92
Advice sheets on website	75
Timetabled sessions	77
Employer presentations and practical sessions	59
One-to-one support	53*
Placement Fair	44
Resource room	63
Student reports	58

*The relatively low rating is possibly because an increase in overall student numbers meant that less one-to-one contact time was available for each student.

Positive comments on the team's service in 2003/4 included:

Very supportive to me on a number of occasions

Summer placement scheme was excellent

Web site is fantastic – well organised

They were always very helpful. Even during the summer when the Placements web site was closed.

Students' suggestions for improvements

In answering the 2003/4 questionnaire, students made suggestions for improvements, and these are being addressed.

"Presentations from post placement students would be welcomed" – we now have the placements fair, mentoring scheme, profiles on the website plus involvement at the International placements session. We shall develop and use Alumni links throughout the 2005/6 year.

"More international placements" – over 100 international positions have been advertised in 2004/5, compared to 23 in 2003/4. International placements fit well into the increasingly international perspective of ABS's undergraduate programme, allowing students an insight into working overseas and the various challenges and opportunities that this presents.

"Difficult to book an appointment" – anecdotal feedback suggests that students find the appointments immensely helpful, and although the facility is advertised formally it is often word of mouth, following a successful appointment, which leads other students to use the facility. It is worth noting that appointments are not always the appropriate channel for students (often their enquiries can be dealt with and answered face-to-face during office hours). In direct response to this suggestion, surgery sessions have been used for the first time this year with great success, with high numbers of attendance and repeat attendance. An extra post of Placements Advisor will allow more contact time to be offered to students where deemed necessary and will further advance the student-centric focus.

Placements Fair

In direct response to feedback received from students several changes will be made to this event in 2005. The fair will be re-branded to reinforce the main aims of the event, namely the sharing of experiences. In addition, to help students gain maximum value from their attendance, a 'speed-dating' style question and answer session will be piloted next academic year.

Involving first year students was a real success: it help to demystify the placement process at an early stage and showed students a variety of means of improving their employability in the 'Skills Zone'. It enabled students to reflect, very early on in their university career, on where they had potential skills gaps, allowing time to address these.

Timetabled sessions

A key determinant of success is attendance, which overall was excellent, helped by offering students two sessions from which to choose each week. Given that the sessions are not mandatory and ABS do not offer credit for placement preparation, it is vital that the sessions take a highly practical, real world perspective in order to engage students, and this is where the employer involvement is so valuable.

Employer presentations and practical sessions

Due to historically poor turn-out at employers' sessions and the implications of this for continued relations with employers, students are now charged a £5 deposit prior to employer events, following the Careers Service example. This has not been found adversely to affect the number of students signing up for events but has increased the attendance rate to 100%.

International student session

Placements are not mandatory for international Students because the fees paid are significant compared with those of UK/EU students, hence increasing the financial burden of the placement year. A key indicator of success for both the specific International Student Session and other support given to this cohort is the number of International students who successfully secure a placement. The figure is already impressive at circa 50% but with additional services targeted at this cohort we hope this figure will rise.

Mentoring Scheme

Mentoring was offered to all International students based on research which suggested they responded very well to one to one support (Higson and Jones, 2002). The scheme was also used by a number of EU and UK students. The uptake rates were superb. Due to the informal nature of the scheme there are no formal feedback figures, although anecdotal feedback suggests students have found it really valuable.

Summer Scheme

The success of the Summer Scheme is evaluated primarily on the number of students who were placed via the scheme, which is always very high. The level of support the scheme offers throughout the summer is vital to ensure students remain focused.

Motivation Event

For those not placed via the Summer Scheme the Motivation Event has proved a great success with its developmental and motivational focus many students gain placements shortly after attending the event.

All respondents indicated that the session had either exceeded or met their expectations. Students were also asked to indicate the main idea/key skill they felt they had gained from the event; selected responses were as follows:

- How to contact companies and the need for open questions
- Confidence when contacting companies
- Being more organised with job searching
- I feel I have gained in motivation and will act on it

Partnership Working

An additional measure of success is the extent to which the Placements Team work effectively with both internal and external representatives in order to offer a comprehensive service to students.

Students have been found to make good use of the excellent facilities available via the Careers Service, including the Careers Online Self help package and careers skills sessions which are advertised to students seeking a placement via the placements website events section.

The Placements Team also takes an active role in publicising short term employment opportunities and skills sessions offered by Graduate Advantage, Schools Liaison, SIS (Students Industrial Society/CRAC), AISIEC, Students Guild and Job Shop. These play a vital role in preparing students for their placement and can be measured by the high volume of students who are involved in extra curricular activities such as university committees, sports and short term work placements.

Employer Evaluation Questionnaire

It is also important for ABS to ascertain employers' levels of satisfaction, as placement preparation also plays a part not only in helping students secure their placement but in helping them successfully integrate and add value once placed.

An evaluation questionnaire was sent in 2003/4 to all placement supervisors to canvass their opinion relating to the students, their work and the university (see Table 3). Nearly 97% of employers stated that the placement student either met or exceeded their expectations hence the overall picture from employers is exceptionally positive.

Table 3: Employers evaluation of students' skills 2003/4

Skill Area	% of employers responding who rated student as Excellent or Above Average 2003/4
Application of skills and abilities	68
Effort made during placement	82
Communication skills	68
Managerial duties	65
Working relationships	76
Taking the initiative	76
Contribution made	69
Attitude	78
Effectiveness in accomplishing tasks	76
Motivation	80

The questionnaires also asked about the recruitment process and university support (see Table 4).

Figure 4. Examples of employer comments on the recruitment process and university support, 2003/4

Employer	Feedback
WAA	The placement process was good, and everyone at the university was very helpful.
3M	This is the first year our group had used a placement student ... I personally see everything as working well, and is beneficial. A professional and well run process.
Oxfam	I've been grateful for the straightforward approach Aston takes towards placing and supporting students. The few queries I have had have been very quickly and easily sorted out. The quality of students Oxfam has received this year has been excellent. I am looking forward to welcoming more students in the forthcoming academic year and in developing this relationship in the longer term.
IBM	Better and more active involvement than we have seen from other universities.
Comag Magazine Marketing	Aston will continue to be our first call when finding suitable placement students.

Specific feedback on the students' contribution included:

Student is a valuable member of the team. His commitment and motivation has been outstanding.

Her commitment and loyalty will be missed when she leaves as will her positive communication skills with my clients and suppliers. She has proven herself within my company and I have no hesitation in recommending her to future employers unless she wants to come back – the door is open.

Her energy and enthusiasm generally created an environment of activity and helped others to positively apply themselves.

(Student X) immediately impressed with his positive, enthusiastic attitude and his friendly and outgoing personality. Consequently, he has been a popular member of the finance team. His work has been of a high standard, and he has quickly grasped the nature of the work he has been asked to do, with minimal supervision. Certainly, in the last nine months particularly, I have come to think of X as one of the most able members of the team, rather than as a work placement student. His contribution has been excellent.

The overall picture from both employers and students is highly positive but future developments and increasingly high expectations mean that ABS must continually review these processes and ensure they continue to meet the varied needs of key stakeholders.

Discussion

This case study has demonstrated the work the Placements Team do in order to meet both the short term, target driven objectives but perhaps more importantly the development of longer term employability skills.

A high level of investment is made in the development of ABS Placements Team, and with the imminent introduction of a new post, the team is able to offer a flexible and truly value-added service. Development within the team will also play a key role in building on the already impressive international links.

While underpinning the programme objectives the Placements Team must prioritise working in partnership with employers, internal departments such as the Careers Service and other government initiatives, both to ensure a thorough understanding of what employers expect and to use resources within higher education to prepare students effectively. The team also needs to remain up to date with developments within the selection field, so that students are well versed in common techniques they will face.

One to one contact can make all the difference but with finite resources and increasing student numbers innovative solutions are required to meet escalating employer and student expectations. This is where IT support plays a vital role. The placements website already offers much flexibility, but further enhancements in IT provision, such as skills analysis packages and interactive advice sheets will enable students to access guidance around the clock.

We have made increasing use of returning students but this is to be extended to alumni. Positive role models can provide students with the motivation and impetus which is hard to instill via other methods, and often have the greatest impact on students.

It is also vital for ABS to identify any barriers to placement which students may encounter, and to help them successfully overcome these. Focus groups will be introduced for students who are placed later in the cycle to explore any themes which may have led to this.

In conclusion, ABS' Placements Team must be alive to new challenges and continue to offer an approach which is flexible for both employers and students to enable ever evolving needs to be met.

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