

Wariabharaj, M. & Vidal, R. (2012). Exposure to “real life” professional experiences through a shadowing scheme that matches penultimate and final year students with employers. Learning at City Journal, 2(1), pp. 29-39.



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Original citation: Wariabharaj, M. & Vidal, R. (2012). Exposure to “real life” professional experiences through a shadowing scheme that matches penultimate and final year students with employers. Learning at City Journal, 2(1), pp. 29-39.

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Exposure to “real life” professional experiences through a shadowing scheme that matches penultimate and final year students with employers

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Executive Summary

This paper reports on a learning development project undertaken during 2010 – 2011.

The Work-Shadowing Scheme (WSS) was primarily developed in response to feedback following the National Student Survey (NSS). The NSS brought to light the apparent discrepancy between, the number of structured programmes City University London host that offer exposure within professional environments (for example, formal placement schemes) and the number of students looking for experience within a professional context. In an attempt to bridge this gap, the Career and Skills Development Service began thinking about how to implement a scheme that would provide City students with a unique opportunity to gain professional experience across a variety of industries. The WSS project was designed to provide students with the opportunity to shadow a guide from a sector of their choice. Typically, students requested to shadow guides in industries associated with their course, however an additional benefit of the WSS was the potential to shadow a guide within a sector that was not traditionally associated with their degree. On completion of a shadowing experience, students were given the option to shadow two more employers. This aspect of the scheme was further commended, and students reiterated the benefits of gaining ‘snapshots’ of multiple sectors before making crucial career decisions.

1. Background: Why did we run this project?

An issue that keeps coming up via the NSS feedback and is also highlighted in the University’s Learning and Teaching Strategy, is the need for our students to gain exposure to the world of work, and engage with professionals in their chosen field. However, the number of structured placements or summer internship schemes on offer is limited compared to the number of students looking for work experience. Furthermore, a lot of students are, for a number of different reasons, unable to commit to a structured placement or lack the necessary skills and experience to secure one.

This scheme was put together to enable students from all backgrounds who demonstrate the necessary enthusiasm and commitment, to shadow professionals in their chosen industry fields. By giving students the opportunity to gain exposure to different industries and professions, it will also allow them to gain a better understanding of their strengths as well as the skills they need to develop in order to secure a job in their chosen profession.

The pilot project aimed to offer 70-80 shadowing opportunities to penultimate and final year undergraduates from across City/Cass. Using our current employer contact database we set out to secure opportunities from a variety of different sectors (Finance, Law, Engineering, IT, Media, Retail, Health, Not-for-profit, Public Sector etc), in order to ensure that they meet the needs and expectations of our diverse student population.

1.1. What were our specific aims?

- To improve the student learning experience by giving students the opportunity to 'shadow' a professional for one day, in an occupation they are considering as a future career.
- To give local and national employers and City University London Alumni the opportunity to engage with our current students and strengthen their relationship with City.
- To improve students' commercial awareness and increase their understanding of business etiquette.
- To explore a shadowing scheme as an alternative to traditional work placements for students and employers to share "real life" professional experiences.
- To evaluate student and employer views on the shadowing experience.
- To develop guidance for the provision of this type of scheme and design a model that can be adapted to individual School or Departmental needs.

1.2. What were the learning outcomes?

By the end of the project, we hoped we would be able to:

- Identify the benefits and challenges of running a work shadowing scheme for students.
- Consider work shadowing as an additional approach to employer engagement.
- Understand the employer perspective and be able to manage employer expectations.
- Identify ways that work-shadowing can be used to encourage students to reflect and increase their self-awareness.

2. Implementation

The scheme commenced in January 2011 with coordinators making contact with employers and City alumni to request one day shadowing opportunities. Those interested in taking part were asked to complete a short form so that we could collect details on the person who would act as a Guide, and, what the work-shadowing day would cover. In total, 30 employers expressed an interest in participating in the scheme, with the majority offering more than one shadowing experience, often across various areas of their business.

The scheme was advertised to students in February 2011 using a variety of different media. Interested students were asked to complete a short application form online which had been designed to assess their motivation, commitment to the scheme and their passion for the industries and roles they would like to explore. Screening templates were put together to identify strong candidates. Students were not expected to know everything about their preferred career paths, as the aim of the scheme was to help them explore those options.

We received 78 applications before the closing date in March and invited the strongest candidates to a short interview. Those that were invited to take part demonstrated high levels of commitment and, it was felt that these individuals would benefit most from a scheme of this sort. Post interviewing, 42 students were selected to join the scheme.

2.1 Student breakdown

The majority of students that were successfully accepted onto the Work-Shadowing Scheme were from Social Sciences (48%) with high number of students from Psychology or Economics related courses. This can partly be attributed to the fact that there are fewer work based interventions in place for students from this School.

At 19%, Cass was also well represented, followed by the School of Engineering and Mathematical Science at 14% (mainly Maths related courses).

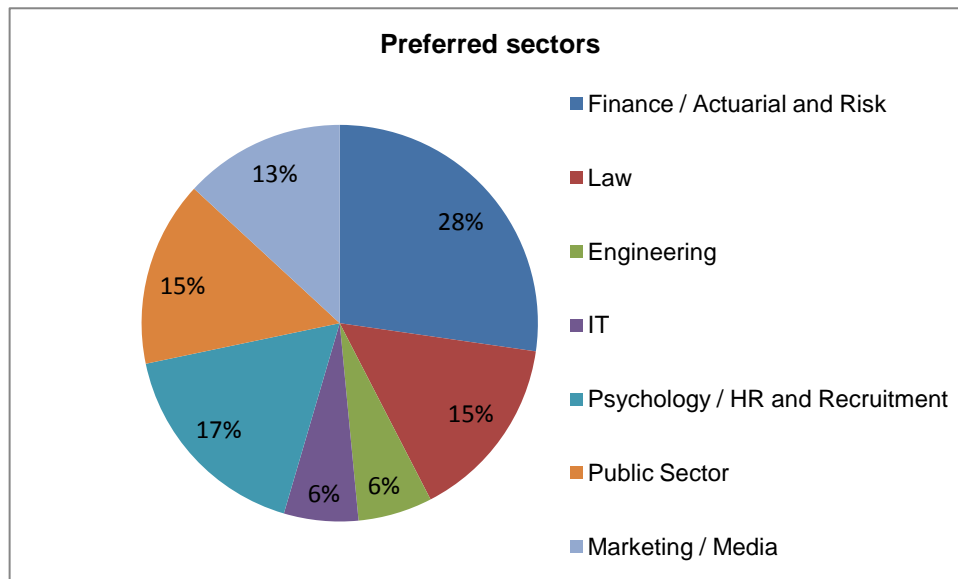
Around 12% of successful applications were from the Law School, with only 7% from Informatics. Low numbers of Law students applying could in part be due to the range of structured placement opportunities available to them in the legal sector. Similarly, the School of Informatics has a dedicated professional liaison team to help students arrange work experience/placements within the IT industry.

Most of the students that applied for the scheme were Undergraduate students, with 86% of those accepted studying at UG level. The remaining 14% were studying at Postgraduate level. The overall student population at City consists of 67% UGs and 33% PGs, highlighting the overwhelming response from UG students.

A high number of students accepted onto the Work Shadowing Scheme were due to graduate in 2011 (58%), highlighting the focus students place on networking with employers in their final year. Penultimate students accounted for 35% of all students on the Work Shadowing Scheme, which also indicates students are keen to establish working contacts and gain a 'hands-on' feel for the work a particular sector undertakes as early as possible.

2.2 Preferred sectors for work-shadowing experiences

As part of the application process, students were asked to select which sectors they would like their work-shadowing experiences to be in. As shown in the chart below, around 28% of students requested exposure to the finance sector.



3. Training

All successful candidates had to attend compulsory 2-hour training sessions on business etiquette to ensure that they make the most out of their participation on the scheme.

Training objectives were set on the basis of student applications/ interviews and the interactive session was designed to cover the following

- Introduction to the work-shadowing scheme
- Top tips on how to network effectively
- How to make introductions to employers
- PLAN: goal setting and preparing for the scheme
- DO: questions to ask on the day
- REVIEW: evaluation and reflection

“Plan, Do & Review” checklists were developed and students were encouraged to put together a personal development action plan with SMART objectives.

A short survey was conducted after the training via SurveyMonkey to gather feedback on the structure, content and delivery of the session.

Analyses of the feedback are as follows;

Please tell us what you thought about the structure and organisation of the day: 95% of the students that provided us with feedback were very happy with the format of the training session and felt that the workshop structure was particularly useful. This was further supported by students’ reflective comments, e.g. “It was very interactive, which made it a lot more interesting”. They also liked “the small practice sessions in which we were required to create our own pitch and other similar activities”.

Please tell us what you thought of the effectiveness of the training materials used:

91% of the students were happy or very happy with the style of training, indicating the delivery of the seminar was efficient in terms of conveying the core material to the audience. Comments include: “I liked the information packs that were given”.

Please tell us what you thought of the effectiveness of the facilitators i.e. subject knowledge and presentation skills:

95% of respondents felt that the facilitators were knowledgeable, confident and supportive. This was further supported by students’ reflective comments, e.g. “I like how [the facilitator] gave examples on how to network and keep in contact with contacts”.

Please tell us what you thought of the topics covered during the day:

Around 91% of respondents felt that the topics covered during the training session were beneficial and directly applicable in terms of preparing for their shadowing experience. They particularly valued topics that related to liaising with employers in a professional context, commenting that the session was useful in terms of providing “an insight as to what is expected from students when attending the work shadowing placement. Information provided was very useful and helpful”.

Was the content of the seminars appropriate for your needs? An overwhelming majority of students (96%) felt the seminar was appropriate in equipping them with the skills needed to network with professionals in a confident, professional manner.

To what extent were your expectations met during the day? 86% of respondents felt that the session met their expectations (responded “well” or “very well”). Some students felt that the sessions could be slightly longer, with case studies of past work shadowing experiences. This is certainly something that we could look to incorporate into future training sessions.

3.1 Setting up the work-shadowing experience(s)

Following the training, coordinators liaised with interested organisations to confirm which students would be making contact with them. Students were then provided with details of their shadowing opportunities, along with template introductory emails to use as a guide for setting a shadowing date. Students were instructed to make prompt contact and inform the Careers Centre once the date of their opportunity had been set. We did find that students needed to be reminded of the importance of making prompt contact with guides that were expecting to hear from them – an issue that can be explained by the timing of the scheme (the busy exam period) and perhaps addressed during future training sessions.

At the time of writing this report, 67 work shadowing experiences were arranged between students and employers.

4. Evaluation of feedback

With the aim of identifying whether outcomes had been met and to identify areas of improvement, students and employers were asked to provide feedback on their Work-Shadowing experience. Comments have been overwhelmingly positive and have been summarised below.

4.1 Summary of students' feedback:

What skills, experience and/or knowledge have you gained from your participation in the work shadowing scheme?

In general, students have;

- Valued the opportunity to gain an insight into how organisations operate on a day-to-day basis.
- Gained an appreciation of different organisational hierarchies, processes and cultures.
- Been able to see how theory is integrated into practice.
- Learnt about the various routes into an organisation.
- Been able to learn about a variety of roles and identify key duties and responsibilities.
- Really understood that gaining work experience is as important as having strong academic grades.
- Identified specific skills needed for a role or an organisation and how this relates to their studies and/or extracurricular activities.
- Seen how various departments work together.
- Understood the challenges that face businesses.
- Gained firsthand experience as to how key decisions are made.
- Been involved with some great projects and received the opportunity to contribute ideas.
- Discussed how to improve their employability prospects with senior members of staff.
- Learnt more about application and assessment procedures and how to stand out during these stages.
- Had the opportunity to gain technical knowledge.
- Realised the importance of networking and keeping in touch with contacts.
- Thought about the transition from full time study into full time work.

What skills do you think will be necessary to be employed in the role that you shadowed as well as in the organisation where your shadowing experience was based?

Responses to this question show that students have used their shadowing opportunities to identify soft skills and technical skills that are specific to each organisation. Many have thought about areas of improvement and the next steps that they need to take to build on existing skills.

Has your work shadowing experience confirmed or changed your perception of the specific role/sector/organisation and how? Whilst a number of students did not go in with strong perceptions of a specific organisation, many have commented on how much they learnt through the experience. A large number of students have discovered that the entry routes and job roles are actually much different from what they initially thought. For some students, the shadowing has confirmed a real interest within a particular industry and in a lot of cases encouraged individuals to seek further work experience. In other examples, the experience has helped identify areas that they do not want to work in.

What did you enjoy most during your work-shadowing experience?

Students really valued;

- The opportunity to attend meetings where critical decisions were made,
- Being able to talk on a one-to-one basis with various team members and ask them questions,
- Hands on involvement with a project and having some tasks to complete.

There were a few negative comments from students who expected to be given more responsibility on the day, this is certainly something that can be addressed in future training sessions with regards to setting expectation. Comments on what students enjoyed can also be passed on to guides to ensure that they prepare a day that is engaging for students.

Following this experience what would you identify as your next steps to achieve your career goals? Students have successfully been able to identify some next steps toward helping them achieve their career goals. In many cases this involves gaining more experience and a large number of students have been invited back to do more shadowing. Some students have gone on to make applications to the organisations they shadowed.

Is there anything that we could do to improve the work-shadowing scheme? The majority of students were happy with the programme and felt that each shadowing opportunity provided them with a very different experience. Comments regarding efficiency and structure confirm this is an initiative that we should continue with in the future. However, students did feel the opportunity should be much longer, with many requesting week long shadowing experiences.

Would you be interested in shadowing more professionals? If yes, can you please specify the industry/ies or sector/s? Almost all of the students that provided us with feedback said they would like to shadow more professionals in the same industry or explore a few different areas.

4.2 Employer feedback:

An overwhelming majority of employers left positive feedback with regards to student's enthusiasm, preparation and communication skills. A summary of employer's feedback has been provided below.

17 out of the 20 guides that provided us with feedback were the main contacts responsible for organising the work-shadowing experiences, and all respondents stated they would like to be part of the scheme again next year.

95% of the guides felt that the student's level of enthusiasm and motivation was either excellent or very good, and 85% commented that the student's level of preparation for the day was excellent or very good. Around 10% felt that the student coming in for the day could have done more research on the organisation, this is something that can be addressed in future training sessions. With regards to suitability, around 80% felt that the students that came into their organisation were eligible for their programmes. Some employers have commented that they would like to see more individuals that fit their selection criteria, and others would like to know more information about the student in advance so that they can tailor the shadowing experience accordingly. All of the employers were satisfied with the amount of communication prior to the work shadowing day but some have stated they would like some more tips on how to put together the experience – something we can certainly work on based on feedback from this year.

Guides were also asked to provide feedback on the following:

Please tell us what you and/or your employer gained from your participation in this scheme? Feedback reveals that the guides really valued the opportunity to meet with students from City University London. A number of employers participated in order to raise their profile on campus and as a result of the process, gained a fresh perspective on how their organisation is perceived. They felt that the scheme provided the opportunity to see the skill sets of current students, and the challenges that they face when thinking about long term career options. Some organisations felt that through participation, they were able to take a look at their department and identify some strengths and areas for improvement. This really highlights that the scheme is very much a two-way process for both employer and student.

Is there anything we could do to improve the scheme? Employers and guides have appreciated that the scheme is simple with regards to initiating opportunities. On the whole, they have been happy with the quality of student they were paired with, although some employers would have liked to have more control over which students were chosen to shadow said organisation. This was more of an issue where organisations saw the scheme as a recruiting tool for their programmes.

As mentioned above, there have been some comments around the levels of preparation, and, it is noted that students really need guidance on how to research the organisation they are going into. There were also a few incidents whereby students did not turn up. This should be addressed in training sessions and a contract can be issued to stress the importance of the scheme and acting in a professional manner that represents the University.

5. Key successes and whether the project achieved its learning outcomes

The project has been successful in providing students with the opportunity to 'shadow' various professionals for one day, in an occupation they are considering as a future career. Feedback has confirmed that through seeing workforces in action, students have increased their commercial awareness and knowledge of how businesses operate, including an understanding of trends in their chosen field and key challenges facing businesses today.

The majority of students have felt that exposure to professional environments has enabled them to plan ahead / identify their next steps to achieve their career goals. They have developed a network of contacts that they will stay in touch with and, in some cases, use these contacts for course assignments. A number of students have already made arrangements for further work experience or applied for the organisations' formal placement or graduate scheme.

It has been great to see how students' perceptions of organisations and specific industries has now changed and how they have been motivated to develop their skills, experience and knowledge in order to perform a specific role or, apply, to a certain organisation.

The scheme has been a great way for City to strengthen links with alumni and employers (large blue chips as well as local SMEs) and raise awareness of the courses we offer and the high calibre students we have enrolled at City. We have seen involvement from organisations that do not traditionally engage on campus at City and hope that they will be keen to get involved with more initiatives at City University London as a result of the scheme.

We also feel that the project has increased our awareness of the employer perspective and how organisations would like to raise their profile on campus, explore different ways to engage with potential candidates and where they would like to gain greater insight into candidate perceptions of their organisation.

Having the project promoted in the summer edition of the Graduate Recruiter, as well as the Islington Chamber of Commerce and, through company articles, has also helped us raise our profile as a University and be seen as a service that is flexible and responsive to student needs.

A number of employers have expressed an interest in participating in the scheme again and participants have suggested some small changes to the scheme that would improve both the student and employer experience. It is felt this is an initiative that can be continued in order to further develop guidance for the provision of this type of scheme and to design a strong model that can be adapted to individual School or Departmental needs.

5.1 Key challenges and suggested improvements

- To improve students' commercial awareness and increase their understanding of business etiquette. Whilst the training was designed to address this, there are some areas that need to be highlighted / discussed in more depth, such as how to go about researching an organisation and the importance of making prompt contact with Guides.
- Greater management of employer expectation via sharing more information about students that would like to shadow them. This will allow the employer to tailor their schedules and hopefully provide additional insight with regard to allocating a student the best matching Guide for the shadow day.
- Put together some top tips for employers based on feedback from the project. This could include examples of schedules from previous employers and quotes from students about experiences they particularly enjoyed and why. As an example, employers could be encouraged to think about student contact with other members of the team, as that will enable them to get a better insight into how the organisation operates as well as the different roles available. Although we would not expect a student to undertake actual work tasks, it can be highlighted that it is beneficial for them to become involved, observe and gain experience in the day to day duties that the professional and their team undertake.
- Employers could be called at the end of the experience to obtain their feedback. This would also help us to prepare students that are going into the organisation further down their academic/career route.
- Greater management of student expectation, so they are aware that whilst the opportunity is only for one day, there is potential to discuss longer shadowing opportunities at the end of the experience.
- Students would need to be issued with a contract to stress the importance of being professional with regards to making final arrangements and attending on the day.
- Students will also need to be reminded that their day will typically involve witnessing the Guide conducting normal daily activities, rather than actually being given work to do, but occasionally small tasks might be offered.
- Earlier contact with potential guides so that we can cater to the demand of students – particularly in sectors that are popular and those that are harder to find work placements (such as counselling or biomedical engineering).

- Going forward: we will further explore the idea of working with academic departments to implement the scheme on a local scale within City University London. This could involve embedding a scheme like this into each respective curriculum, in addition to the teaching of subject-specific knowledge. It would be good to discuss with departments the type of support would they like from the Career and Skills Development Service in order to implement a strategy such as this.

6. Dissemination

We plan on sharing positive feedback with employers so that we can highlight how their contribution has really made a difference to the students' levels of aspiration and motivation. We also hope that this will encourage them and more employers to participate in the scheme next year.

It is hoped, that the insights gained through running the scheme can also be shared with departments within City, to provide them with some ideas to engage with and strengthen their relationship with local and national employers, and City University London Alumni. Whilst the scheme cannot replace longer work placements, the 'real life' professional experiences can add value to a students cv and help them to evaluate their skills, identify career paths, set goals and go on to secure internships and other work based opportunities.