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Working to improve the learning experience: engaging students in work-related learning and promoting employability

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The importance of an emphasis on employability linked with student engagement in work-related learning (WRL) throughout curricula is clearly identified in Section 7 of Leeds Metropolitan University's current Assessment, Learning & Teaching (ALT) Strategy. Benefits of vocational courses have long been recognised in most of the newer universities and go back to their earlier foundations as polytechnics, which in turn often grew out of institutions providing various types of professional training. Such universities, including our own, have a distinct advantage in this respect over many of the longer established universities in the UK and this is a valuable selling point in promoting our courses and meeting recruitment targets.

Key aspects of WRL are placement provision and work-based learning (WBL). The value of WBL in Higher Education (HE) was reviewed by Brennan and Little (1996). Subsequently Gray (2001) produced a briefing paper on the subject. From this work and reinforced by evidence from educational experience, the rationale for the incorporation of placements into courses of study is based foremost on enhanced employability considerations and support of Government policy for Professional Development and Lifelong Learning. This is also in line with Objectives 2.3 (Employability) and 3.3 (Work-based learning) of the University's Corporate Plan and links to the integration of personal and career development planning at each level of a specific course. As recommended by Dearing (1997), WRL contributes to collaboration between placement providers, students and academic staff and hence to Continuing Professional Development (CPD). Widening Participation, Citizenship and Equal Opportunities are also supported by WRL, through provision of placements in diverse settings and by engaging students in the work discipline with its statutory aspects, incentives and ethical considerations. By extending placement provision and WRL internationally, enhanced networking is facilitated in the broadest arenas of academic disciplines through involvement with diverse new contacts and alumni. Such engagement assists in appreciating diversity and the development of global perspectives, thus serving as a model for dissemination of good practice more widely across academic provision. As a consequence student and staff horizons are broadened within the curriculum (ALT Strategy, aspect 8). In these ways and as described above, by contributing to attracting new students when marketing our courses, Aim 3 (student recruitment and Widening Participation) of the University's Corporate Plan is also supported.

Students benefit personally from work-based placements by gaining experience, confidence and the acquisition of meta-competence learning. Within a course, WRL facilitates the development and acknowledgement of generic employability skills, often referred to as 'transferable skills'.

Acquiring these and more specific competences enable students to progressively extend their educational development and achievement in a range of professional workplace settings and situations. A key role for Professional Development in Higher Education has been identified by Nicholls (2000) and the integration of WRL into Personal Development Planning (PDP) helps students to reflect on work practices and their placement learning experiences, including particular critical instances of deep and significant learning. The importance of reflective practice has been clearly demonstrated (Schön, 1983) and is widely recognised and encouraged in professional education and training. Reflection assists students in bringing academic perspectives into practical issues and vice-versa so allowing more a holistic understanding of a subject area. This is illustrated by a quote from Final Year BSc (Hons) Human Nutrition student Shazana Akhtar's 'newspaper' article on her educational visit to the *Yorkshire Post* (December 2005): "This module (*Nutrition of the Community*) links closely with my experience at *Sure Start*, (and) has been extremely useful ... I enjoy every part of this module. ...(it) is realistic in terms of applying theoretical knowledge in practical situations, which is useful in employment ..."

Experiential work-based learning complements that in the academic setting and leads to enhanced social and interpersonal skills. This gives students the opportunity to become more effective advisors and communicators, with better presentation and dissemination skills. Their abilities in reflection, assessment and evaluation are also likely to improve. WRL enables students to engage in problem-based learning (PBL) and taking action on 'real world' issues. Since WRL also provides learning opportunities in team-building and both multi-disciplinary and multi-agency working, inter-professional learning (IPL) opportunities are consequently extended through student engagement on placement with other disciplines. For example part-way through a sandwich placement a student reported (2005-6): "I have travelled all over the UK, worked with people in every part of the company as well as with schools and the public and have learned so much. I really enjoy the work."

Placements create a tripartite relationship in a learning triangle between the student, the Placement Supervisor and the Placement Facilitator. The involvement of suitable WRL mentors for students is a desirable additional support mechanism. Alumni can play a very useful role in this respect particularly if they are already employed in the graduate workplace setting. They can also assist as guest lecturers and represent a valuable pool of potential placement providers.

The creation of an innovative Student-directed Placement Support Network might be key in this and can provide students with a further dimension of placement learning, where students engage informally in receiving and giving peer support from/to the course levels above and below as well as across the individual student's own cohort. Continued development of this approach over a number of years will lead to stronger alumni networking which will feed into the tripartite learning triangle assisting development and maintenance of placement partnerships between employers and the course. Provision of an appropriate level of support, supervision and guidance, will enhance WRL achievement and assist students in developing the ability to critically review, evaluate and apply academic theory in the integrated acquisition of practical skills and competences required for professional employment.

The crucial point is that WRL does give students the skills professional employers seek and so enhances a key outcome - employability. Excellent verbal feedback from supervisors, employers and students past and present demonstrates that WRL is highly valued. Placement supervisors have often told me "this student is excellent and has made an important contribution to our work" (e.g. January 2006). On a number of occasions this has been supported by students taking up graduate employment in the same organisation. The impact of WRL on employability can be assessed by monitoring: quality assurance indicators from the above sources; overall evaluation of the student learning experience and WRL contribution; first destination statistics and subsequent CPD. Recognition of the value of the placements is generally strongly acknowledged across professions and importantly sandwich years or equivalent blocks of WRL contained within professional courses are often formally accredited by their Professional Institutions/Bodies/Associations for Membership/Registration purposes.

In the area of health care Mulholland *et al.* (2005) investigated the preparation of practice educators in order to enhance practice-based learning. They identified the emergence of the following six broad key themes for good practice:

1. Learning and Teaching in Practice.
2. Support for Learning in Practice.
3. Reflection in Practice.
4. Assessment in Practice.
5. Interprofessional Learning in Practice.
6. Diversity in Practice.

Addressing the issues raised by these key themes (which also apply more generically) presents further opportunities for enhancing WRL. The current importance of for example Interprofessional Education (Barr, 2002), assessing soft outcomes (Dewson *et al.*, 2000) in terms of employability and issues of diversity and inclusion extend beyond health care to all disciplines. The Parekh Report (2000) provides a useful general basis for appreciating cultural considerations and supporting the development of more specific models to address cultural competence - such as that exemplified for health care by Camphina-Bacote (1999). Other aspects of diversity also require consideration in relation to Equal Opportunities and statutory requirements.

In addition to incorporating the above themes, general challenges to placement provision include (not exhaustive):

- Integration of WRL into the course curriculum in close alignment with Professional Development and any Professional Body requirements.
- Logistics including systems & procedures, related documentation, liaison/visits, adequate staffing and dedicated administrative support.
- Financial considerations (staffing and students).
- Possible need for prior police and/or health checks.
- Placement supply -
 - Availability, timing & duration, competition, accessibility, location & accommodation.
- Placement suitability -
 - Quality Assurance (Garnett, 1997; QAA, 2001).
 - Risk Assessment and Health & Safety issues.
 - Overseas placements considerations.
- Student support, progress and achievement -
 - Preparation, peer & staff support mentoring and communication.
 - Assessment (methods/tools etc), reassessment & failure, withdrawals and complaints.

- Overseas placements considerations.
- Staff development, support & guidance.
- Accreditation of placement learning academically and professionally.

The regulation and accreditation of placements are clearly very important, but need to be developed and implemented in a way which is neither excessively inhibitory to the supply of placements nor to enhanced student employability. A sensitive balance is therefore needed between quality and quantity which also nevertheless ensures that all professional, legal and ethical requirements are met. This is beyond the scope of the present paper, though it is still worth recognising the complex demands of placement provision. However the benefits from the perspective of the student learning experience are highly favourable and strongly recommended.

Overall WRL is an important contributor to diverse student learning which is central to the University's ALT Strategy and can be reinforced within courses by a creative curriculum, research informed teaching, formative assessment and E-Learning, all of which are enhanced by staff support, development and reward.

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Associated Websites:

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www.health.heacademy.ac.uk

www.leedsmet.ac.uk

www.qaa.ac.uk

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