


2010

Beyond Big Business for Student Work Placement, a Guide for Placement Practitioners.

University College Cork

Roadmap for Employment Academic Partnerships [REAP]

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University College Cork and Roadmap for Employment Academic Partnerships [REAP]. Beyond Big Business for Student Work Placement, a Guide for Placement Practitioners. 2010.

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As work placement is now a compulsory element of many third level programmes, placement opportunities must be provided for relevant students. Family businesses and community and voluntary groups can offer students a varied and unique learning opportunity.

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Dundalk Institute of Technology (DKIT)
Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT)
National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG)
National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NUIM)
University of Limerick (UL)
Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT)

This project was kindly funded by the Higher Education Authority under the Roadmap for Employment Academic Partnerships (REAP) project.

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Beyond Big Business for Student Work Placement

A Guide for Placement Practitioners

Project Description

In recent years, the enormous value of work placement for third level students in Ireland has been accepted and promoted by students, education providers and employers. However, due to the current economic crisis, it has become somewhat more difficult for work placement practitioners in Irish higher education institutions (HEIs) to secure placements for the tens of thousands of students who undertake work placements as part of their third-level programmes on an annual basis.

Some employers who would have been the 'traditional' placement partners of HEIs (multinational companies, public sector bodies, etc.) have now had to scale down the number of positions that they can provide to students. Nonetheless, as work placement is now a compulsory element of many third level programmes, placement opportunities must be provided for relevant students.

The purpose of this project was to examine the potential for overcoming this shortfall by developing new partnerships with both family businesses and community and voluntary groups, as although these organisations may not traditionally have been seen as within the reach of HEIs, they are bountiful within almost every community, and are most certainly within the orbit of every HEI in Ireland.

The project focused on a number of key areas in order to try and make student work placement a more straightforward and appealing form of engagement to these employer organisations:

- Ascertaining the views and experiences of placement practitioners, family businesses and community and voluntary groups of this type of engagement;
- Analysing the key opportunities and challenges raised by these stakeholder groups;
- Identifying means of overcoming these obstacles and establishing guidelines for this type of engagement.

Project Results

In order to collect data on the experiences and views of placement practitioners, family businesses, and community and voluntary groups, the project team distributed a number of surveys to both placement practitioners¹ and employer organisations² from the targeted groups. The following is a brief outline of the key results from those surveys.

Reasons Employers Engage in Work Placement

- Opportunity to recruit student upon graduation;
- Desire to help up-skill students;
- Desire to engage with local HEI;
- Organisational need;
- Opportunity to give something back.

Reasons Employers do not Engage in Work Placement

- Lack of belief in learning experience they could offer students;
- Inability to commit to placement duration;
- Lack of financial resources;
- Lack of personnel for mentoring students.

95% of employers surveyed who had no past experience of work placement would consider taking a placement student in the future

100% of employers surveyed would hire a placement student upon graduation if the opportunity arose

Key Benefits of Work Placement in Family Businesses and Community & Voluntary Groups

- Students receive a varied learning experience and a unique opportunity to develop their skills;
- Students may be required to be more hands-on and take on greater responsibility;

- Students can see that they have made a difference to the employer;
- Students bring a new vision and ideas to the employer;
- Students can help to ease the workload of staff and help bring specific projects to completion;
- Students provide insight into new methods currently being taught in third level institutions;
- Employers can identify potential new recruits;
- Employers can contribute to the up-skilling of the next generation;
- Employers gain greater links to higher education institutions.

Key Challenges for Employers in Engaging in Work Placement

- Lack of understanding of what exactly work placement entails and the core aims it hopes to achieve;
- Lack of resources required to provide students with training, supervision, mentoring, pay, etc.;
- Lack of realistic expectations of the placement student's capabilities;
- Inappropriate duration and timing of work placements;
- Matching of students with organisation's needs and existing staff.

What Employers Want

- Greater awareness of placement opportunities;
- Deeper understanding of work placement;
- A simplified placement structure and process;
- Further input into the timing and duration of placements;
- More contact with placement practitioners on a regular basis;
- Help identifying suitable placement students.

Guidelines for Placement Practitioners

Guidelines for Placement Practitioners³

Pre-Placement

- Actively seek out placement partnerships with family businesses and community and voluntary groups and promote placement opportunities to them;
- Use a personalised approach for all communications with these organisations;
- Proactively promote the value of work placements in family businesses and community and voluntary groups to students;
- Once an employer organisation agrees to host a placement student, provide them with the support they require in understanding the placement process;
- Offer help, where possible, with recruiting an appropriate student to meet the employer's specific needs;
- Provide templates and ideas for job specifications, contracts, student induction, confidentiality agreements, etc.
- Ensure that the employer is suitably prepared for the placement by providing them, where possible, with:
 - › A brief and simplified overview of work placement and the employer's role in this arrangement;
 - › Details of the key goals of placement, as well as the learning outcomes and assessment methodologies applicable to the placement;
 - › Contact arrangements for the duration of the placement;
 - › Details of the procedures in place to deal with unsatisfactory students;
 - › An input to the development of suitable induction processes for the student;
 - › Guidance and support for the workplace mentor who will have responsibility for the student for the duration of the placement.

During Placement

- Maintain regular contact with the employer and student and offer support as required;
- Respond to all queries from the employer in a timely and professional manner;
- Manage the on-going assessment of the placement's learning outcomes;
- Provide timely feedback on the attainment and evidence of the student's required learning.

Post-Placement

- Complete the assessment of the student's placement including the employer assessment elements;
- Seek and act on feedback from the employer and from the student on the placement process as part of a continuous cycle of improvement;
- Explore other potential opportunities for engagement with the employer.

¹ Responses were received from 29 practitioners representing 14 HEIs based in 10 counties across the country. These practitioners are responsible for placing approximately 5,000 students, coming from approximately 150 third level courses spanning the disciplines of Humanities, Engineering, IT, Science, Business, Health and Education, on an annual basis.

² Responses were received from 33 employers around the country – 15 from family businesses and 18 from community and voluntary groups. 55% of these respondents had hosted a work placement student in the past.

³ These guidelines have been adapted from the 2010 study conducted by the REAP project on 'Work Placement in Third Level Programmes'.