

Credit bearing undergraduate placements – should we or shouldn't we? Staff and student perspectives.

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Abstract

A credit bearing placement, in lieu of a dissertation, has been offered as an option on the environmental undergraduate programme at the School of Interdisciplinary Studies (University of Glasgow) since 2001. All students are offered this opportunity with approximately 75% of each cohort choosing the placement. Students are encouraged to identify and secure placements themselves, as part of developing their graduate attributes (e.g. effective communicators, confidence, adaptability, resourcefulness and responsibility), although staff support is offered - particularly in the latter stages to ensure project suitability, and satisfy insurance, and health and safety requirements. Initially placements tended to be localised within Dumfries and Galloway, then Scotland-wide, and now placements internationally are encouraged. Students have been placed with organisations such as: RSPB, WWT, Natural Power, Xodus Consulting, SRUC, Archipelagos Institute of Marine Conservation, Australian Koala Foundation, Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, Pöyry, Edinburgh Zoo, and the Scottish Wildlife Trust to name a few.

To enable a student to make a valid contribution to a placement organisation, they have to have acquired a certain degree of knowledge and understanding of their subject – as a result the second semester of their third year of their degree was identified as the most suitable i.e. just before their honours year.

Since the placement is worth 60 credits (half the credits required at level 3) a robust system of assessment has to be employed. Students therefore submit an initial review of the organisation and their personal learning goals before commencing the placement. While on placement the students keep a work-based journal detailing information that will benefit them in the future (e.g. methodology, contact details, literature reviews), and the organisation is asked to provide an interim and final progress report. On return to the university, the student writes a short dissertation based on a number of themes. These themes encourage students to make links between theoretical learning on their courses and the reality in the workplace (e.g. conservation theory and conservation in practice), and to critically evaluate the future and sustainability of the organisation or project.

Should we or shouldn't we? The administrative burden of organising and finalising placements shouldn't be under-estimated - this can start when the student is in their second year. In addition placement providers can withdraw support at the later stages due to changed priorities, or the students themselves can change their mind! However, the benefits to the student, the placement provider and the University easily outweigh any difficulties.

Keywords

Employability, employers, placements, students, work-related learning