

## **Digital literacies and work placements: the study**

Digitally Ready has carried out research into digital literacies for student employability, focusing on the University of Reading's embedded and extra-curricular placement schemes. The project has engaged with staff, student, and internal and external employers who had experience of receiving Reading students for placements or graduate employment.

The study has investigated:

- how work-related and placement learning (WRPL) opportunities help students develop their digital literacies
- staff, student and employer needs, expectations and experiences.

The study aims to inform strategic discussions around the planning, monitoring, assessment and evaluation of University-facilitated placements by identifying enablers and barriers to students' development of digital literacies through WRPL opportunities.

The investigation has focused on the University's two major placement schemes as well as placement opportunities embedded in the undergraduate curriculum. The study was carried out through a series of structured and semi-structured, exploratory interviews with placement students, placement tutors and supervisors from a broad range of disciplines, as well as internal and external employers.

All interviews were conducted by a student researcher, Rachel Glover, an undergraduate student in Politics and International Relations here at Reading, funded by the Digitally Ready project.

### ***Work placement schemes at Reading***

Reading currently has two major placement schemes:

- Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programme (UROP)
  - UROP is a paid placement scheme which allows undergraduate students in their penultimate year of study to work with academic staff on University research projects. Placements typically last six weeks over the summer vacation. Students receive pre-placement training and ongoing support and present their projects at a research showcase event.
- Summer Employment Experience and Discovery (SEED)

At the time of the study, SEED was a paid internship placement scheme for returning students and local/regional business and enterprise. Placements typically lasted six to eight weeks over the summer vacation and were based in a diverse range of businesses, with students undertaking specific project-based assignments. Students received pre-placement training and ongoing support and presented their projects to a jury at the 'Finale'. SEED has been replaced by a new Reading Internship Scheme (RIS), which will be launched this summer.

In terms of opportunities embedded in the curriculum, WRPL provision on all undergraduate programmes came into effect from the 2011/2012 entry, with plans for similar provision at

postgraduate level under development. Embedded placement options come in three ‘flavours’, the so-called ‘Skirts’ model:

- Maxi placement: year-long placement
- Mini placement: placement equivalent to a whole module
- Micro placement: placement which forms part of a module

### **Placement support**

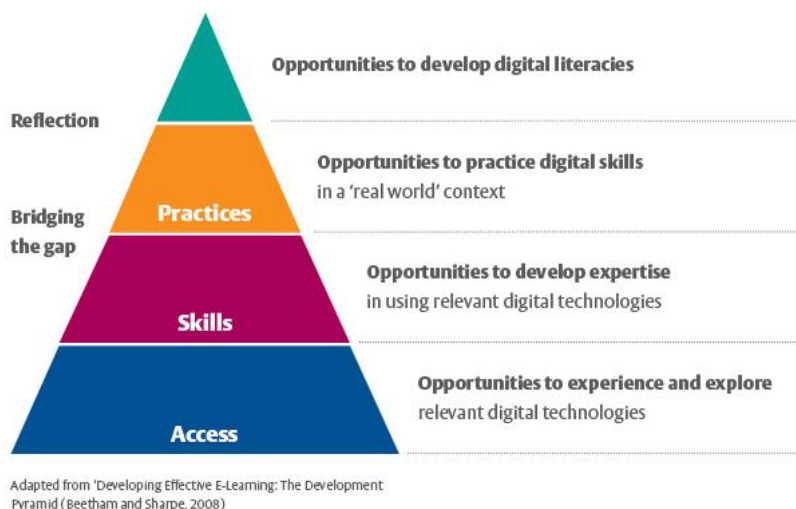
In keeping with the University’s federal and collegiate structure, embedded WRPL opportunities are managed at the School/departmental level rather than being centrally administered. Placement officers in each School or department promote placement activities, assist students in their search for suitable opportunities, and are responsible for ensuring that placements run smoothly, fit with students’ academic studies and will benefit their career prospects.

Central support is provided by the University’s Careers, Placement and Experience Centre (CPEC). Central Placement and Development Officers assigned to each Faculty further support students where placement support at the School/departmental level is limited, or where students wish to undertake placements outside of their degree programme. CPEC also provide pre-placement training to prepare students for placements as well as post-placement sessions with a focus on skills articulation.

CPEC (The Careers Centre) also administer the University’s extra-curricular placement schemes.

### **Framework**

In order to effectively evaluate how work-related and placement learning (WRPL) helps our students to develop their digital literacies, we adapted Rhona Sharpe and Helen Beetham’s model from ‘Developing Effective E-Learning: The Development Pyramid’ (2008). This describes the development of digital literacies – those higher-level attributes that denote a critical, informed, expert user of digital technologies – in terms of access, skills, and practices.



Work placements present an invaluable opportunity for students to develop their digital literacies, as they allow students to

- experience and explore digital technologies (access)
- develop technical proficiency with digital technologies (skills)
- apply digital skills in a professional context (practices)

## **Findings**

### 1. *Awareness.*

The study highlighted the need to raise awareness of the importance of digital literacies for student employability. Many staff and students still lack a proper understanding of the digital literacies, and the transferable and subject-specific skills that are sought after by employers.

### 2. *Reflection and articulation.*

The investigated also underlined the importance of reflection in students' development of digital literacies. The value of work placements lies in making the link between students' learning and professional practice. Making this link in the student's mind by encouraging them to reflect on their digital experiences and articulate what they have learnt from them can help students develop their digital literacies and employability.

### 3. *Monitoring and assessment.*

Furthermore, the study revealed that there is still work to be done to develop proper mechanisms for monitoring students' digital skills development, and for assessment criteria of embedded placements. This seems to be the case in particular for disciplines where placement options are relatively newly-established – such as the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at Reading. Staff were often unsure how to assess placements, relying heavily on supervisor and employer feedback and traditional assessment methods – almost exclusively based on written reports. Students often felt they had received little or no guidance on how to reflect on their experience and articulate their learning, and many staff found it difficult to advise on and to assess such work.

### 4. *Tangible outputs.*

Furthermore, students interviewed as part of the research study particularly the opportunity to produce a tangible output as part of their placement – 'having something to show for it'. Interviewees explained that being trusted with their own responsibilities for a particular aspect of their projects made them feel valued. Tangible outputs enabled them to make stronger applications and perform better in interviews. Digital technologies have an important role to play in this, as they lend themselves to the production of tangible, visible and often public outputs developed to a high standard of finish.

### 5. *Positive online presence.*

Some internal and external employers interviewed for the study specifically referred to students' online presence and gave examples of looking students' up online before

meeting them in person, particularly for an interview. However, many students still seemed unaware of the importance of a positive online presence and unsure how to go about raising their professional profile online.

6. *Social media skills.*

The study confirmed that external employers are actively looking for skills in strategic use of social media. This could mean that students who build experience and expertise in this area will have an advantage over their peers.

7. *Time to develop.*

SEED employers and UROP supervisors frequently stated that SEED and UROP placements (which typically last six weeks) were not long enough as it takes time for students to develop the skills needed to make a positive contribution in the workplace and have a lasting impact on their project and the environment they work in.

By contrast, academic staff and students found six weeks to be a sufficient amount of time, and even much shorter embedded placements (with the shortest lasting only 5 days) were thought to be useful.

8. *Contact with supervisors and co-workers*

Students participating in the study consistently stated that what they valued most was simply the experience of being immersed in a professional environment. Regular contact with co-workers was very important to the students interviewed for the study. A number of students felt somewhat isolated and even lonely during their placement, whereas those who did enjoy close working relationships with a supervisor and colleagues (including other placement students) felt more integrated and valued, but also felt that they had learnt more.

9. *Promoting the 'digital' placement experience*

Internal and external employers and placement supervisors were often disappointed with low numbers and the quality of applications from students. Many UROP placements were clearly filled by students who had been hand-picked or at least strongly encouraged by staff. Recruitment criteria for UROP placements tended to focus on academic performance rather than skills, and UROP and other placements were typically advertised on a subject basis rather than a skills basis.

Students frequently described uncertainty about employers' and supervisors' expectations, day-to-day tasks and project outcomes/outputs, and benefits of undertaking a particular project. Students often felt placements were not aimed at them. Confidence was also an issue, with many able students lacking confidence in their own abilities and anxiety over the competitive nature of the job market.

10. *Maximising 'digital' benefits of WRPL.*

What makes a successful placement experience? Here is a short summary of recommendations based on our research findings:

- a. Promote placements widely and on a skills basis – be clear about skills required upfront and those they will develop during their placement.
- b. Provide students with opportunities to explore and practise a variety of digital technologies as part of their placement.
- c. Allow students to take ownership of a particular aspect of their project and responsibility for producing a tangible output. Digital outputs such as websites, blogs, or social media sites may help students develop their professional profile online and develop the social media skills sought after by many employers.
- d. Ensure students have regular contact with supervisors and colleagues to ensure students are well-integrated and supported.
- e. Consider longer placements and/or flexible models (e.g. part-time over a longer period of time; extensions) to allow students time to develop and make a lasting contribution.
- f. Develop effective mechanisms for monitoring students' digital skills development to ensure students are digitally ready for placement and employment.
- g. Encourage and support students to reflect on their experience and articulate what they have learnt to enable them to make stronger applications, perform better at interview, and ultimately, are better able to carry out their placement or graduate job.
- h. Assessment criteria for placements should take into account students' digital skills development, their ability to reflect on their learning, and their ability to articulate that learning. Some consideration should be given to alternative methods of assessment.