Digital literacies for student employability: Spotlight on work placements
Interim report, October 2012

Research Aims

Digitally Ready is conducting a research study on digital literacies for student employability, focussing on work-related placement learning (WRPL). The project has engaged with University of Reading staff, students and employers to investigate

- How WRPL opportunities (in and extra-curricular) help our students develop their digital literacies
- The nature, breadth and depth of students' skills, levels of confidence in applying skills for employability, and ability to reflect on and articulate skills gained
- How well students' skills match employers' expectations
- What staff can do to support students' skills development and articulation

The study aims to inform the planning, assessment and evaluation of University-facilitated placements. The research has focussed on the University's UROP and SEED schemes as well as in-curricular opportunities including maxi, mini, and micro placements, particularly in the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences.

Methodology

The research involved both structured and unstructured interviews with placement students, placement tutors and supervisors and employers who had an existing relationship with the university. **14 UROP supervisors** (10 staff members, 4 PhD students), **7 external employers** (Predominantly SEED employers), **12 students** and **12 Placement Tutors** have been interviewed to date.

- The UROP supervisors were from a range of disciplines across the university including Mathematics; Construction Management; Classics; Psychology; Typography; Archaeology; Systems Engineering; Politics & IR, Business, and Biology.
- Supervisors of SEED students were from Eptica, UoR Facilities Management Directorate, UoR Campus Services, Henley Business School, UoR Knowledge Transfer Centre, and Logica.
- The research has focussed on Placement Tutors in FAHSS, including disciplines such as Geography; Classics; History; Philosophy; Typography; Politics & IR; Economics; and Film, Theatre & Television.
- Students are from across the entire University with the majority doing placements in the summer months of Part 2.

The questions asked aimed to gain an understanding about what a UROP or SEED supervisors role entails, the experiences they had during their role as placement supervisor and the expectations of the students' usage of digital skills before and throughout their placement.

Similarly, the interviews with students evolved around their role during their placement and the skills they developed. The questions asked aimed to encourage the students to reflect on what they got out of the placement, what they most valued, and how they had developed particular skills.

The interviews with Placement Tutors attempted to draw out their motivations for taking on the role. The interviews also explored how well-supported Placement Tutors themselves feel, their responsibilities and opportunities for exchange with other Placement Tutors. Furthermore, the interviews explored how in-curricular placements are assessed and how student are encouraged to reflect on their experience in terms of skills development.

All research interviews were conducted by Rachel Glover, an undergraduate student in Politics and International Relations, funded by the Digitally Ready project.

Documentation

Documentation includes:

- Contact lists
- Email correspondence
- Audio and video recordings of interviews
- Researcher's own interview notes
- Summary reports written up from interview notes
- Interim reports
- Photography
- Presentation slides used for dissemination

Dissemination

The project has had a number of opportunities to present our findings thus far:

- Throughout the project we have posted updates in written and video format to document our progress on the Digitally Ready Blog:
  http://blogs.reading.ac.uk/digitallyready/author/dc008644/
- The project presented at the RAISE conference in Southampton 13/09/12 – 'Developing students' digital skills through placements – Maximising student engagement'
- We also presented at the Faculty of life Science Teaching and Learning showcase 01/10/12 – 'Experience with digital literacies'
- We plan to present at another Teaching and Learning Showcase 11/10/12 – 'is 'Digital literacies' for student employability: Spotlight on work placements'
- UROP case study, poster presentation and talk
- SEED panel presentation – 18th October
- The project will produce a final report which will include relevant recommendations and suggestions for further research

Findings

Extra- curricular placements – UROP/SEED

- Supervisors feel that placements are too short and need to be extended so that they and the student get the most out of the placement
- Placement timings should be more flexible e.g. a student could work part-time throughout summer.
- Both UROP and SEED need greater promotion. This means reaching more students and particularly local employers.
- UROP and SEED need more promotion based on the *benefits* of doing a placement e.g. how placements can enhance personal development, skills development and payment benefits.
- Placements should be advertised on a skills basis (skills required, but also skills that the student will develop) rather than on a subject basis.
- Currently placements are predominately filled with 'proactive' students and students that are handpicked by academics (typically with UROP)
- Placements are not reaching students that would greatly benefit from personal research/career/skills development (relates to promotion of benefits and advertising on a skills basis)

Students and extra-curricular placements

- Students seem to value self-initiated placements over internal schemes like UROP and SEED. They believe it is not as strong on their CV.
- The majority of students are furthering skills that they *already* have, not acquiring *new* skills.
- The main skills that students valued from placements were predominately soft skills. These include an understanding of the office environment, speaking to adults in the workplace, email etiquette. Students really valued colleague's and staff feedback.
- Students had little or no prior skills that were required for placements (other than a basic knowledge of MS packages)
- 'Emotional literacies' have also been an important factor. Placement students can often be lonely and have little contact with other students during their placements.
- Students that were given the opportunity to produce a 'tangible output' during their placement were able to see how they had contributed to the overall project.
- Some students have seen the university as a 'safety net' that ensures the accountability of their placement.
- The majority of students said they would recommend a placement to another student.
- Many students said that they really valued the pre-placement sessions run by SEECC, particularly the 'What to expect' aspect.

Employers and extra-curricular placements (SEED)

- Employers greatly value the questioning and 'fresh input' that students bring. They also value students' advanced knowledge of social media and were actively seeking these skills.
- Employers have found that students have the relevant skills but are unable to articulate effectively how they use these skills.
- Employers have spoken very positively about the SEED programme and think that would be very attractive to other local businesses if they were made aware of the scheme.
- Employers were surprised by the lack of interest and low number of applications for their SEED placements.

Academic staff and extra-curricular placements (UROP)

- Academic staff have greatly valued having the students input into their own research work. The majority said they planned to supervise another UROP.
- Academic staff have been disappointed by the lack of applications and interest in UROP.
- Academics have found it difficult to advertise UROP's across departments. A number have considered advertising the projects on a skills basis rather than by subject.
- Some academics have applied for a UROP with a specific student in mind.

In-curricular placements – Placement Tutors

- Many Placement Tutors were either unaware of their title or were cautious about admitting to the responsibilities of a P.T.
- Placement tutors have little or no contact with other Placement Tutors and the majority are unaware of the Placement Tutor forum.
- The majority of placement modules include a reflective report where P.T's have little guidance about the content.
- P.T's also have little guidance on how to asses placement related work (reflective reports/presentations)
- P.T's have little awareness of digital skills

Recommendations

Key factors in successful placements

- Placement supervisors have put a lot of thought into the aims and outcomes of the project in advance. They have considered the role of the placement student carefully.

- Placement supervisors that regularly outlined the projects intentions/outcomes (e.g. what the research may be used for) had students that had a better understanding of their contribution to the wider company/project.
- Students that were given an opportunity to and were encouraged to reflect on their personal skills development had a greater understanding of how the placement benefitted them.
- Students that have regular contact with co-workers and there placement supervisors felt integrated within the work environment and felt valued by the employer/academic.
- Students that produce a tangible output whilst on placement value having something 'to show' for the work that they have done.