Contingency Planning for Placement Provision: Case Studies

This document accompanies the supporting resource on Contingency Planning for Placement Provision and contains a suite of case studies from providers demonstrating their approaches to managing disrupted placements and their contingency planning for forthcoming placement activity.

QAA is grateful to all those who have shared their practice in this way. The case studies included in this document are as follows:

1 **'Engaging with the workplace: Shell modules as an alternative to placement'**

Keele Institute of Innovation and Teaching Excellence, Keele University

2 **'Contingency planning for six and 12-month placements'**

Edinburgh Napier University Business School

3 **'Contingency planning for placements'**

The University of Warwick

4 **'Keeping the student wellbeing and experience at the heart of our COVID-19 response within the Faculty of Media and Communication, as part of the overall institutional policy'**

Bournemouth University

Case study 1

Engaging with the workplace: Shell modules as an alternative to placement

Keele Institute of Innovation and Teaching Excellence, Keele University

Lou Taylor-Murison, Head of Apprenticeships and Experiential Learning

Introduction

Like the rest of the higher education sector, Keele University has undertaken a number of activities to support and sustain student experiential learning activity in the pandemic. This case study focuses specifically on activity undertaken to design, approve and deploy a portfolio of shell modules. Activity was initiated through the University's Education Committee in order to provide an option where placements were likely to become unavailable or unviable.

These modules provide an infrastructure through which to deliver and accredit short, non-professional body regulated placement activities, embedded in the curriculum. These activities typically reside in programmes in our Faculty of Natural Sciences and Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Module development

Staff from the Keele Institute for Innovation and Teaching Excellence (KIITE), predominantly from Experiential Learning and Careers and Employability, collaborated to develop three shell modules. These were 15 and 30-credit Level 5 modules and a 60-credit Level 7 option for our postgraduate programmes. The initial brief was for research-based modules but the developed shells also offer scope to include virtual, simulated or project-based experiences, fitting the notion of 'Engaging with the Workplace' as a module title. Development activity was fairly rapid and was undertaken through a series of video meetings and online and asynchronous collaborative document creation over a two-week period.

The Level 5 modules incorporate two equally weighted assessments, which are interchangeable in terms of scheduling. One of these is based on an existing careers portfolio assessment from a Business School placement module and presents a good fit regardless of the type of work-based or work-related activity undertaken. The portfolio assessment draws on reflective practice, development of transition-related employability outputs such as CVs and activities designed to inform and prepare for recruitment processes. The assessment draws upon interactive resources from our content rich 24/7 Keele Careers Online platform.

For the other assessment we created optionality, enabling students to undertake an online placement comprising one or more virtual or simulated internships with a sector or organisation analysis involving a project-based learning scenario, a critical incident reflection, or a report based in a work context to be agreed at programme level.

The Level 7 module incorporates a much more substantial research project with the expectation of depth of critical appraisal in a theoretical context. The research project will include a detailed sector or organisational analysis; critical interrogation of 'graduate identity' as defined by the chosen sector or company; and an examination of the workplace culture (diversity, behaviour, values). It includes scope to undertake other activities agreed at programme level.

Approval and deployment

The shell modules were rapidly agreed through quality assurance and established in our e:vision system so that they could be mobilised where required. While the shells are authored by KIITE, host schools are able to replicate modules to create a programme-owned iteration and tailor the assessments as required.

A shared drive contains a collection of useful materials including handbooks, assessment links and slides to support school delivery.

Future plans

In addition to the modules resolving immediate challenges where students would have been unable to complete the existing placement requirements, they have a future facing role, for the forthcoming academic year and beyond. The University is in the process of exploring how a shell module approach might also mitigate some of the mobility challenges associated with future international placement activity, alongside enterprise education and project-based learning.

The rationale and assessment flexibility of the modules is strongly aligned to broader activity through our Curriculum Design Framework and activity to reimagine placements by creating a portfolio of physical and virtual, civic and project-based opportunities for students. The latter activity will be accelerated through our Office for Students Knowledge Exchange project 'Student Knowledge Exchange Re-imagined - Removing the barriers, engaging communities' with the University of Birmingham, which commences in September 2020. This work is particularly timely in the context of a changing external environment for student experiential learning.

Case study 2

Contingency planning for six and 12-month placements

Edinburgh Napier University Business School

Dr Patrick Harte, Dr Craig Wight, Alice Strong and Deborah Callister

Introduction

This case study highlights practice relating to the following QAA contingency planning principles for placement provision:

- Ensure that every module involving a placement has a Plan B that will be used if COVID-19 restrictions resume. Utilise virtual placements and modified assessments where necessary.

- Implement flexible alternative assessments if this will enable placements to run. Ensure such alternative assessments are in line with your provider's existing academic regulations and/or no-detriment policy.

In the Business School we have two key undergraduate placement modules which offer a six-month and 12-month placement, which are worth 60 and 120 credits respectively. It is important that students can meet the academic requirements of the placement module to ensure transition to final year.

Six-month placement module

For the six-month placement module, a 'Your placement, your decision' approach was introduced, which allowed students to choose an assessment option which they felt was best for their own personal and placement circumstances. Students were given three options:

- Option 1: For students who expect to continue their placement through appropriate remote working and social distancing.

- Option 2: For students who have had, or will soon have, their placement furloughed or terminated, but who feel they have accrued sufficient contact time/work experience to develop a shorter portfolio which builds in reflection on the impact of COVID-19.

- Option 3: An alternative assignment was introduced for students who had secured a placement and were subsequently told that it was not going ahead, or students who had started their placement but it was then cancelled or postponed very early on (less than 10 weeks in). Finally, this option was offered for students who had not yet secured a placement.

The alternative assignment follows university policy, where students must be given the opportunity to pass the module and asks students to produce a portfolio consisting of an

introduction, an analysis of a business and business function related to their degree programme, and a reflection on the module and placement experience.

Academics have also started to consider contingency measures for the next academic year, where six-month placements will start between January and March 2021. We are anticipating a reduction in placement opportunities available for this cohort of placement students, especially in sectors such as hospitality, festivals and events, and travel and tourism. In light of this, the placement team will be working with academics to secure more live projects as a means of providing students with the experience of working with industry while still maintaining our employer relationships across sectors who want to support university students but who may not be in a position to offer a placement.

12-month placement module - BA (Hons) Business Studies

For students on our Business Studies degree, it is compulsory for all students to complete a 12-month placement. If a placement is not secured, students transfer onto a flexibly managed programme. Alternative assessment measures have been introduced for Business Studies students currently out on placement as well as contingency planning for those who are due to start their placement this summer.

For students who are completing a 12-month placement in the academic year 2019-20, amendments to the assessment have been made in order to ensure students experience a seamless progression to their fourth year. Students already have sufficient material and experience to complete the portfolio, however, amendments have been necessary in relation to their learning plan, to include reflection on the impact of COVID-19 on their placement. For example, some of our students are recognised as key workers and many students have transitioned to remote working. This will be done in liaison with their Academic Tutor after communication of their individual placement circumstances.

For students who are due to start their 12-month placement in 2020-21, we are currently and actively supporting students to secure a placement and working with employers to place students. We are allowing flexibility on the start date of the placement - for example, into October 2020 - however, a placement must be secured and a contract of employment in place before September 2020 or the student will be required to enrol on modules.

If a student cannot secure a placement before September 2020, the student will still continue on their Business Studies degree but the programme structure has been changed and will now allow the option of a six-month placement in trimester 2 with all compulsory programme modules completed in trimester 1. The placement must be completed by September 2021 in order to progress to the fourth year, where the programme will remain unchanged. Where a student does not secure a six-month placement, there will be the option of academic modules.

Case study 3

Contingency planning for placements

The University of Warwick

Kimberley Harris, Internships Development Manager

Context

- Warwick has placements across every faculty, the majority of which are optional 12-month intercalated placements. However, there are shorter integrated placements, for example, three-month lab-based research placements and short arts residencies.

- Individual departments have devolved responsibility for placement practice beyond initial module approval, so it has been challenging identifying a complete picture of risk to learning outcomes, outside of international student mobility. Examples of practice were sought from across the institution - and received from Life Sciences, Education Studies, Warwick Business School, Engineering and Cross-Faculty Studies - demonstrating a similar pattern of approach emerging across the institution.

Stakeholder-led approach - communication - flexibility

There is a theme of instituting a no-detriment policy, then taking a stakeholder-led approach. Staff have been consulting with students and placement providers at a module or programme level in a timely and reassuring way to get a sense of what is practicable for those groups before taking action. This has resulted in increased creativity, flexibility and feasibility in the immediate internal and external response to COVID-19 and has set a pattern that is likely to continue when planning for the upcoming year, as pre-approval by those stakeholders increases the ability to pivot and utilise a phased set of fallback points to which the programmes can withdraw if needed.

Continuum of fallback points

That phased set of preferred fallback points has been more-or-less echoed across the institution, with a clear preference for:

1. 'social distancing-adjusted'/remote/virtual options (partial or whole), **or** finding an alternative placement (possibly including volunteering-type opportunities)

2. **then** 24-week options (and that's especially where there are discipline-specific technical activities or environments involved) possibly via deferral to a later start within the year, but retaining inclusion before the final year

3   **then** transfer to a non-placement variant of the course

4   **then** a final backstop of temporary withdrawal from the course for that student.

The emphasis is on providing a clear continuum of options, with their associated adjustments, so that internal and external stakeholders can understand (a) the triggers for moving along that continuum and (b) how their role and expectations may change accordingly, in good time. Reducing large-scale ambiguity to a series of flow-diagrams means being able to make logical 'if… then…' statements on which staff can base clarifying messages, further operational decisions and assess additional risk.

Assessments and visits are also adapting to virtual/remote experiences, which is forcing a certain amount of creativity but also presenting new opportunities for inclusivity. This is a watershed moment for Warwick to reconsider our starting assumptions when designing placement modules. That said, securing discipline-specific technical experience and environments continues to be a challenge outside of no detriment policies and, as yet, the University is still seeking an appropriate response to the risk to these elements from external factors.

Central support increased

Placement officers across the University have been meeting weekly to share good practice and sound out operational ideas, and the University's Placement Practice Group will continue to assess operational need on a termly basis and in real-time via Microsoft Teams.

The University's Internships Development team is developing toolkits and guidance to support academic departments - particularly around health and safety, and wellbeing - as well as emphasising the importance of being ready to adapt at pace, and we expect these to be factors in future placement planning.

A project is going forward as part of our Business Continuity Programme to map risks to learning outcomes at a programme level.

A number of elements within the new Warwick Online Learning Certificate could be adapted to create a shell module for placements, but this is something that requires more consideration than we have time for in advance of the 2020-21 cohort going out on placement.

Summary

So far, this has been an opportunity to challenge the status quo and be unafraid to harness creativity in order to build in resilience and flexibility.

Acknowledgements

Case study 4

Keeping the student wellbeing and experience at the heart of our COVID-19 response within the Faculty of Media and Communication, as part of the overall institutional policy

Bournemouth University

Vianna Renaud, Placement Development Advisor, Faculty of Media and Communication

Introduction

Similar to other post-1992 institutions, Bournemouth University (BU) has responded to the COVID-19 crisis with a variety of measures to support student wellbeing and the student experience. While this case study will focus on the Faculty of Media and Communication, it highlights the response which has been consistent across the faculties at BU.

Institutional Major Incident Group

As the first alarm about COVID-19 hit the sector, BU established a Major Incident Group, or MIG, with key faculty academics, professional support staff, senior management and members of the students' union. In keeping the student experience at the core of forthcoming COVID-19 policies, as well as ensuring consistency for all students, the overarching concept which was implemented was that of a 'no detriment' policy. While this group met daily at the beginning of the crisis, as of mid-May, they are meeting twice weekly.

Sub-groups have also been implemented, including Education and Professional Practice, Future Student Experience, Recruitment and Admissions, Estates Development and Campus Operations, and IT, with the Research Performance and Management Committee focusing on research activity. These will be in place until further notice.

'No detriment' policy for students

The 'no detriment' policy has been incorporated to reassure students and help reduce their anxiety and stress about their university career. Therefore, key adaptations across the Faculty and greater campus regarding placements include: the reduction of required placement weeks; revised assessment methods for students who have not completed the full placement duration; accepting the time spent on enforced company furlough; and greater flexibility in the acceptance of remote working during the sandwich placement.

Student and staff communications - 'We at BU are there for you'

Regular communication has been a key focus of university activity. The Chief Operating Officer of Bournemouth University has been sending regular emails to all students and staff twice weekly, highlighting the importance placed on student wellbeing. Regular communication such as this has been greatly appreciated by all involved. The Vice-Chancellor has also been contributing to regular podcasts, and we have a Student Wellbeing Centre, accessible from the university website, with designated FAQs on the COVID-19 pages. Collaborative working with the students' union and ResLife (the BU accommodation office) include additional activities shared on social media, opportunities for students to feedback, and virtual wellbeing courses such as yoga.

Revisiting the intended learning outcomes (ILOs) and alignment to PSRBs

It is important to use this time to revaluate the ILOs to ensure if they are still fit-for-purpose given the current situation. While they have maintained relevance, it may be necessary to adapt previous definitions and guidelines of a 'suitable' sandwich placement. Examples of this include the definition of a 'full-time week', what constitutes a suitable working environment, only able to undertake a limited number of placements, and so on.

Relationship building, developing and engagement with placement providers

It has been essential to reach out to placement providers regarding how best to support them, their current placement students, and their overall business needs. This has included supporting them during the furlough process when placement students have been involved, suggesting alternative placements or work experience, virtual, short project-based tasks and assessments. While student placement opportunities for 2020-21 appear to be greatly impacted given the current uncertainty, placement staff are working with providers to identify other possibilities that could best support both employer and student.

The adaptation of sandwich placement support - student-focused, holistic, and situation appropriate

One key element has been the transitioning of face-to-face sandwich placement support to online support through a variety of technological means such as Zoom, Teams, Facebook Groups, LinkedIn and WhatsApp, among others. Traditionally, sandwich placement students receive two official placement reviews during their placement - one being an office/working environment visit and the other, a remote review. Given the ever-changing landscape, these have shifted to shorter catch-ups to 'touch base'. Conducted through Zoom, students have consistently fed back that the video element has been of great importance to them.

Faculty placement staff regularly contribute to a faculty-specific Facebook group, maintaining the message that there are still numerous opportunities for students. Collaborating with the central Careers and Employability team, this cross-referencing has ensured a joined-up support network for students. Placement staff are regularly in contact with academic programme leaders regarding their students and are also taking part in sector-related activities, offered by key professional associations such as ASET for placements, the National Union of Students, the Office for Students, Wonkhe for current higher education news, AGCAS for career advisors, UKCISA for international students, AMOSSHE for student affairs, IASAS for international student affairs, Student Minds for mental health within higher education, among others.

The Placement Development Advisor/Placement Tutor role has become more holistic given the changing nature of student needs and concerns at this time. Activities include liaising with senior management regarding changes to the placement duration; working directly with placement providers regarding the furlough process and/or the unexpected ending of student

placement; increasing student communications and social media contact to best support student wellbeing concerns and mental health; referring students to our central AskBU team and Students' Union Advice Centre for more specialised questions such as those regarding student finance and Tier 4 regulations; sharing student concerns with academics regarding assessment changes; moving various support mechanisms online, as well as preparing the 2020-21 placement students for their future placement.