

## Experiential Learning Vignette 7: Nurturing lifelong learning using placements

This vignette is derived from an interview with Alastair Boot Principal Lecturer and Placement Manager at Harper Adams University. It forms part of a [Collaborative Enhancement Project](#) funded by the QAA.

### Background

Harper Adams is a specialist university that focuses on key industry sectors, such as agriculture, business, land management, plant science veterinary and animal sciences. The common thread throughout is the focus around creative sustainable solutions.

Its established degree programmes have an **obligatory** placement year which allows the design of curriculum and support to:

- 1) Have a common pre-placement phase that supports students to find placements as well as preparing them for their placement.
- 2) Support students in placement through visits by academic staff and through learning and assessment that emphasises personal development planning and reflection,
- 3) Design the final year curriculum leverages the consistency that all students have completed a placement.

This obligatory placement brings benefits to students, staff and industry partners.

### Laying down roots for successful placements

**Bringing applicants and companies together:** Over 500 students a year go out on a one-year placement and this is successfully overseen by a team of academics and practitioners. A Harper Adams' website allows employers to register and students to find appropriate placement opportunities making it easy to connect companies to applicants.

**Preparing students for placement year and focus on core skills:** all students undergo preparation for placements. This support is undergoing change currently with core skills development, reflection and personal development planning being included in the assessed curriculum for all.

**Academic support:** Academic staff maintain contact with students, attend three-way performance feedback meetings along with placement providers. Students on GB placements are visited in person. As students are still at university, support remains both academic and pastoral during the placement year

**Enhancing connections:** The nature of the placements brings many wider benefits, such as:

## The placements trellis

Obligatory placements create scale to:

- **Build a system to connect employers and students:** a website allows employers to register and post placements and allows students to apply for placements.
- **Prepare students for placements:** all students prepared together for placements through provision of support with career advice, job adverts on the university intranet, applications and transition briefings.
- **Engage academics** in support for placement students and through this keep them connected with current industry needs;
- **Employers engage** as know the commitment to placements and this enriches learning.
- **Reflective assessment:** Placement students are encouraged to consciously reflect on their experiences through the use of reflective practice and written reflections. This practice is seen as important for students to gain the most from their learning;
- **Final year students have all experienced a placement,** so come back with an enhanced set of competences. This enriches the final year and means that the design of teaching, learning and assessment needs to reflect the students' capabilities.

## Beyond placements: nurturing lifelong learners

Placements offer a rich form of experiential learning for students, but how do you prepare students for placements?

Is it just about being ready for placements?

Or can the placement be part of a wider lifelong learning journey?

Recognising that experiential learning is a prevailing form of professional learning, then the team at Harper Adams identified that the placement is an ideal opportunity to develop lifelong learning attributes in their students. So not only preparing students for their graduate careers.

The approach being implemented is to have a module at level 5 that develops student's core skills through a process of self-assessment and Personal Development Planning. The cycle in this module is:

- Core skills self-assessment;
- Write Personal Development Plan;
- Develop chosen core skills with materials provided and signposted, reflect on each development process;
- Repeat self-assessment and re-write PDP.

This cycle has the benefit to develop agency and self-regulation (important lifelong learning competences) and allows personalisation of development (an aspect linked to enhanced engagement). Additionally, this approach develops reflection skills in students pre-placement.

This cycle aims to better prepare students to make the most of the early months of their placements as they can self-assess, develop plans and know that their lifelong learning involves ploughing their own furrow.

- Closer connections between programmes and companies, such as through supporting Open Days, guest lectures, industry events and running events like Assessment Centre days for cohorts of students – so enhancing experiences of applicants and current students.
- Experiential learning for staff enhancing teaching: the support of placement students and engaging with colleagues in companies enhances what academics are doing within their wider teaching and learning.

Overall, placements provide an ongoing mechanism between the university and employers that enriches students, staff and industry. At Harper Adams placements work, as employers keep coming back and are involved beyond just placements.

### **Where next?**

Placements at Harper Adams University are a success. Not resting there Harper Adams' team identified that the placement is one experience in a lifetime of learning in a graduate career. Developing lifelong learning competences through a core-skills module at level 2 will develop students' agency in defining their own professional development and better prepare them for their placement as well as their future graduate career; more details are given in sidebox.

### **Final thoughts**

Whilst the obligatory nature of Harper Adams' programmes allows them to design into their curriculum and support structures activities to support placements, transferable aspects emerge:

- 1) Placements provide rich experiential learning for students and supporting these within STEM programmes is important;
- 2) Placements link together academics, programmes and departments to industry on an ongoing basis through exposure to new experiences and practice – this is a rich vein with multiple seams to enhance learning for students and staff;
- 3) Preparing students as lifelong learners – to make the most of experiences and to develop skills to take control of their own learning and future – is a really important aspect for any programme.