

The Agency Project: a Case Study

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Abstract

The 'Agency Project' is a work placement module, where students are based in the workplace for 6 weeks, working on a real project, which is of use to the employer, and submitted for marking by the University. It has been running since 1991, and as many as 60 students can be placed in any one year. The success of the project for undergraduate town planners in their fourth year has resulted in the scheme being extended to include other undergraduate groups, namely those studying for joint degrees (architecture and planning; transport and planning), as well as postgraduate students in the field of town and country planning. This involves the support of at least three professional bodies: the Royal Town Planning Institute, the Royal Institute of British Architects/Architect Registration Council and the Institute of Logistics and Transport. Employer interest is high, and has increased to include virtually all employers in the immediate Bristol region, as well as others more distant. Job satisfaction among students is high, and the project is successful in promoting the subject of town planning to students of joint degrees, leading to higher numbers of students wanting to enter the profession. Relations with employers in the region have been enhanced, leading to a more meaningful understanding and exchange of developments in the field, employment practices and educational.

Good Practice Points:

It is successful because it:

- through the process of reflection, encourages students to become reflective practitioners;
- integrates work-based learning into a range of professional courses in planning and related fields;
- enables educators and employers to co-operate with each other and exchange examples of good practice, each informing the other;
- enables students to link theory and practice;
- assesses a meaningful piece of work which must be of use to the agency, giving the student a feeling of self-worth;
- has involved a large number of agencies over the period, many of whom have participated every year for its duration;
- incorporates an increasing number of students and has been extended to courses beyond its original base, including joint professional courses at undergraduate and postgraduate level;
- assesses at M level;
- helps students develop and practice a large range of skills, enabling them to comprehend more about workplace practices;
- receives very positive feedback from employers and students;
- involves a range of agencies – public and private – and some overseas;
- has been commended by professional bodies.

The Problem

Work placements are often an integral part of professional, university-based education, and they take many forms. But how can professional courses which integrate work-based learning objectives guarantee that the placement encourages the student to become a reflective practitioner? To do so would be to make the work-based learning more worthwhile, to help produce a professional who can reflect on their actions in practice, and be encouraged to continue doing this throughout their professional careers.

Work-Based Learning

In recent years, the government's education agenda has increasingly promoted the accreditation of experiential learning, especially in degrees that aim to meet the requirements of a profession. Lord Dearing in the Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education recommended that:

"all institutions should, over the medium term, identify opportunities to increase the extent to which programmes help students to become familiar with work, and help them to reflect on such experience" (NCIHE, 1997).

The White Paper, "The Future of Higher Education" (2003) specifically encourages work experience placements, stating that they will become ever more important as vocational provision expands. HEFCE is already working to integrate the skills and attributes which employers need, such as communication, enterprise and working with others, into higher education courses, on a subject-by-subject basis (DfES, 2003). Universities have been urged for some time to devise new strategies for improving their graduates' employability skills, including traditional intellectual skills, "key" skills, certain personal attributes, and knowledge about how organisations work and how people in them do their jobs (The National Centre for Work Experience, 1999). It is considered important to allow undergraduates to experience a workplace culture, whilst developing academic abilities in an employment setting. It is true that increasing numbers of students are in paid employment whilst at university, but a scheme that contributes towards their final professional qualification formalises this process, and allows for academic input into the student's first professional working experience.

Town and Country Planning

Students of Town and Country Planning engage in professional education, which involves a dynamic relationship with the profession, employers and the government, who shape course structures and management, as well as curriculum content and delivery (Taylor, 1997). This lends itself well to work-based learning. Students are required to study for at least four years on a course which is accredited by the Royal Town Planning Institute, following which they must work for two years in relevant employment before qualifying for full membership and the right to use the letters MRTPI after their name. The RTPI has recently investigated the education of planners through an "Education Commission", one outcome of which was a

recommendation for strengthening the link between work and education with a requirement for a more structured approach to the first two years of graduate employment (Education Commission Report, 2003). Contributors to the Education Commission drew parallels with the work-based requirements of other professions (chartered surveyors, for example) and commented that more stringent requirements for RTPI membership would strengthen the profession and its image, and allow for the development of the more reflective practitioner.

Town and Country Planning is a subject about which there is much discussion in society, but there is ignorance among the general population about the role the town planner plays and the knowledge and skills required to become a town planner. In its booklet, "Town and Country Planning as a Career", the RTPI (2000) considers it necessary to write about why planning is necessary and who planning is for. This essential basic knowledge is important to persuade people to enter the profession, especially now when there is a clear shortage of planners and a glut of employment opportunities. Many students completing a university course in town planning suggest that they do not fully understand the role of the town planner until they engage with practice in the workplace.

It is vital for the academic to make the link between practice and theory, in order that graduates of the profession reflect upon their actions once employed. According to Schon (1996), town planning is a "minor" profession, its uniqueness not based upon a solid body of science, but upon the problem-solving of value conflict, and the making of value judgements based around public interest. Schon maintains that town planners modify their work in accordance with how they think whilst engaged in the activity of planning, using experience, judgement and skills to mediate and negotiate their way through the complex process towards the achievement of a solution. University courses in town and country planning (and other professions) aim to teach these skills, but it is argued that the student has to put them into practice in the workplace before they can be really understood. Graduates often argue that once in the workplace in a paid capacity, there is no time to reflect; they also suggest that they learn more about the subject of town planning in their first weeks of work than they do in the four years of academic study. During interviews with recent graduates from the University of the West of England, Bristol, in a research project called "Learning to Work, Working to Learn", they said that the links between theory and practice were eventually made after a spell in employment. The ability to reflect is increasingly valued in higher education (Moon, 1999), and it is suggested by Taylor (1997) that an important aspect of independent learning (ie in the workplace) is developing the skills of critical reflection and self-evaluation. It is suggested that work-based learning in planning courses can help students develop habits of reflecting upon their experiences, continually evaluating in a way that encourages learning as in iterative process (Higgins, Simpson et al., 1997).

In order to particularly help them to relate theory to practice, the University of the West of England, (UWE), Bristol, has devised a work place learning module whose aims and objectives allow for reflection before the student embarks upon a professional career. This particular model of workplace learning was originally performed by students of town and country planning at an undergraduate level, but it has been extended to include postgraduates and students studying on joint professional degrees. It has the potential to be

extended further to other professional areas where some experiential learning is essential to the student experience. The assessment may be where the project is unique, as this is notoriously difficult to conduct in work-based learning (Ashworth and Saxton, 1989). However, despite the obvious difficulties in assessing work performed in different situations, the accreditation of experiential learning is becoming increasingly important in the government's education debate.

This case study describes "**The Agency Project**", an experiential, work-based learning module devised for students of town and country planning at UWE, Bristol.

The Agency Project

The Agency Project was first devised in 1990, following discussion regarding the use of work placements in planning education. Some university courses had a sandwich year, but UWE, Bristol (then Bristol Polytechnic) was the first town and country planning course to include a formally assessed work placement. The aim of the project was clear – the student had to complete a worthwhile piece of work whilst based in an agency of planning, which was of use to the employer. In this it differed from other work placements, which were diary-based, work experience or merely work shadowing. The piece of work would be formally assessed, and marks gained would count towards the student's final degree, the one year professional qualification, known as the Bachelor of Town Planning. The period of placement was set at 6 weeks. There was no requirement for the student to be paid.

The first students to participate were the 1990/1991 cohort, and it was thought necessary to ask them to return to college for three study days during the placement period. This requirement was later dropped, as it was realised that students should devote their time to working in the agency, and not interrupt their work by returning to be students for a day. Part of the aim was to simulate the real working world, and students were expected to conform to work times, office rules etc. The first cohort also undertook the project in the middle of their final academic year – ie. after Christmas, and this was later moved to after Easter. This change was successful, as it meant that the work placement was the last part of the course, coming after all the taught modules, and providing a springboard into employment.

Since the early days, the Agency Project has evolved to have clearer learning outcomes, and to include the notion of reflection as integral to the project. The assessment has been refined to include this, the timing has been changed, and the project has been extended to a wider group of students. The project is now taught and assessed at Level M, and contributes towards the MPlan qualification for town planners and the BA (Hons) Architecture and Planning degree for students studying for the joint qualification. The project started placing about 35 students, and now places, in any one academic year, as many as 60 students studying in the field of town and country planning. The Agency Project is a module worth 20 credits, and is assessed as part of a credit based degree programme, where students study modules equal to 120 credits per annum. In 2004, it operated with 4 members of academic staff, working at a ratio of approximately 12 students per staff member.

Aims of the Project

The Agency Project aims to:

- bring students into a close relationship with a particular agency concerned with the environment;
- introduce students to a range of general and specific skills involved with the implementation of planning policy;
- encourage students to reflect upon the theory and practice of the implementation of planning policy, whilst in employment;
- encourage students to develop an approach to future employment that allows for continuing reflection throughout their working lives.
- The aims reflect the clear need to simulate a working environment for students, who will perform a particular task in the workplace, which is concerned with the implementation of planning policy, either individually or as part of a team.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the project, successful students should be able to:

- comprehend the operation and role of their chosen agency;
- contribute positively to the work of that agency in a real life situation;
- comprehend the nature of organisations, their role in the process of implementation and how they inter-relate;
- demonstrate an ability to apply skills of problem identification, analysis, prescription and evaluation;
- apply themselves to communication and inter-personal relations;
- apply themselves to working in teams and as individuals, particularly in relation to time-management skills;
- create and evaluate planning proposals that are effective, imaginative and viable;
- reflect upon the relationship between theory and practice, and the implementation of policy in town and country planning.

The employing agency should benefit in a number of ways:

- from the contribution made by the student towards its work;
- from being able to participate in and influence planning education;
- from the opportunity to develop a closer working relationship with the University;
- from the opportunity to contribute to the ongoing debate regarding work based learning and pre-qualification training.

The Placement

The placement is arranged by the university, (in this case, by the course leader), in co-operation with the students. Students are given the opportunity to state where they would like to work, and to make some suggestions as to their field of work or specialism. This is particularly important if the student has strong feelings about the type of work that they want to do. Students studying planning at UWE specialise in a particular subject, currently European sustainability, transport, tourism, or leisure. Earlier subjects included urban design, urban regeneration and environmental management. In addition, students who are studying for joint qualifications in planning and architecture, property development and housing also have to carry out the project. Every effort is made to meet the student's requirements with regard to the area of specialised study.

The University has links with a large number and variety of different agencies, with which it has built up a relationship over the duration of the Agency Project (13 years). There is a responsibility upon the student to guarantee that this good relationship is not put into jeopardy, and students are expected to take on the role of an employee of that agency.

For the most part, students are placed within Bristol or the surrounding areas, but every year, some students wish to work for a consultant or local authority elsewhere in Britain.

Sometimes, this is the student's home town, enabling the student to live at home for the duration of the project. Sometimes, the student has links already with that place or agency, and arranges their own placement, but occasionally, the university can approach "remote" agencies to request a placement. Students asking for this may have to wait a little longer than others for the place to be arranged; it is always difficult approaching an organisation as large as a local authority. Students are encouraged to at least provide a named contact in a "remote" agency. It is noted that there is an increasing demand for work overseas, and in 2002, a successful agency project was carried out in New Zealand (arranged by the student, but negotiated between the agency and the project leader).

Different agencies offer different opportunities and different types of work. Students are encouraged to think hard about what kind of agency they might wish to work for. For example, some students may have had some work experience in either the public or private sector and may wish to experience another type of work. Some agencies (e.g. Bristol City Council) ask the student to provide a list of their interests, and then projects are sought which roughly correspond with that interest. More usually, the agency sets the task for the student, especially in consultancies, where the student has to wait to see what fee work the consultancy has during the placement period. In the case of the latter, it may be quite late before the consultancy confirms the nature of the project. Some consultancies set work for the student that a traditional consultancy would not have time to do, but which informs their overall approach to planning, and perhaps bidding for work.

Students are placed with local authorities, including unitary councils, district council and county councils; planning consultancies; environmental or voluntary bodies; and "other" planning or environmental bodies. The following shows the kind of work students might be

asked to carry out whilst working with the different kinds of Agency, and some examples of previous projects are given:

1. Local Authorities

Many students still think that there are only two main streams to the planning work of a local authority : development control and forward planning. The truth is that there are a great number of projects being carried out in local authorities, through a variety of different organisational structures, including urban design, economic development, transport planning, housing, regeneration work etc. Students are helped to understand this before they apply.

Bristol City Council poses a good example. It has traditionally taken a large number of students - as many as 15 in any one year - who have been distributed amongst the different sections, working on a variety of projects. Students meet a co-ordinator in the Council who oversees all the placements, and they negotiate their interests and sometimes barter between themselves for a particular project. Students are usually surprised at the range of work on offer. For example, the following represents some recent projects:

- retail policy for an area of Bristol;
- city wide search for sites for new schools, linking work done by planning and education departments;
- parks policy : improvements strategy;
- housing capacity and assessment of sites;
- traffic management scheme for an inner city residential area;
- development brief for Temple Meads Station;
- compilation of an Historic Buildings At Risk register;
- a green transport plan for one of the Council's offices;
- urban design strategy for an area of the city;
- sustainable building guide

Each project was a stand-alone project, although some would contribute towards the wider work of the Local Plan team, or sustainable development team.

The university has good links with many other local authorities, and over the years, has placed students with over 25 different authorities, including all of the local authorities surrounding Bristol.

The following are examples of the projects that have been carried out for Local Authorities:

- Designation of a conservation area;
- Analysis of recent planning obligations and Section 106 Agreements;
- Effectiveness of traffic calming;
- The potential of a 24 hour economy;
- Economic development opportunities in renewal areas;

- Planning appeals;
- Feasibility study for inner city housing;
- Development control guidance note on a particular subject e.g. shop fronts;
- Committee reports for a number of minor planning applications.

One issue that has emerged in recent years has been the demand by students for development control work. In order for a student to take on a caseload, some Local Authorities have argued that the placement needs to be at least 8 weeks (to meet statutory time limits), and that 6 weeks does not allow a student to carry a case through all its stages. Where a student has been interested in development control, agencies have been encouraged to think of a wider remit, other than just taking on minor planning applications – hence the inclusion above of an analysis of Section 106 Agreements. This allows the student to reflect about the work of the development control section.

2. Planning Consultancies

Planning consultancies have been steadily growing in numbers in recent years and correspondingly, an increasing number of students have been working for them on placement, and taking jobs with them after graduation. The university has good links with a large number of local consultancies, as well as some in other areas, including London. Students are told that to work for consultancy requires some commitment to the private sector. Often these students become involved with commercial work and high standards (sometimes long hours) are required of them. It is also said that this is very rewarding, and students who work for consultancies are more likely to be offered permanent or temporary jobs as a result of their Agency Project.

Students express a desire to work in the private sector and then they are guided as to which kind of work they might want. Some go to planning consultancies which deal mainly with development control issues, but representing a private client's interests, sometimes in conflict with the Local Authority, including planning appeals and public inquiries. Many go to consultancies that are representing clients in the Local Plan process, and in 2001, urban capacity studies were carried out by a number of students working for consultancy. Others become involved in larger scale projects for a variety of clients, although retailers and housebuilders are typical clients. Although one or two students have worked for the latter directly, there is a reluctance to employ students because of the commercial and confidential nature of the work. Where students have worked on anything sensitive, (MOD property, for example), the student and the university has been required to agree not to release any information regarding the project.

Projects that have been carried out for consultants in recent years include:

- Feasibility study of sites for housing;
- Site search for housing sites;
- Analysis of factory outlet centres;
- Environmental improvements of green spaces in London;

- Planning for traffic generated by major events;
- Investigation of sites for "new settlements";
- Uses for former MOD sites;
- Urban growth rates in the South West;
- Feasibility of uses for declining industrial areas;

3. Environmental and Voluntary Groups

Every year, a few students do their agency project for a voluntary or environmental body. Sustrans (the cycling group) is an organisation which has taken a student nearly every year, especially useful to them because of the workload generated by their successful Millennium Lottery Award for the National Cycle Network. Ecological agencies have taken a student in the past, including the Environment Agency. Some voluntary organisations operate on a shoe string, and the students may have to help out on a number of fronts, but also might have to work with a minimum of supervision. In recent years, students have been discouraged from working for a voluntary body where no desk space can be provided.

Some of the projects done by students working in this sector include:

- Assessment of suitable camp sites along cycle routes;
- Comparison of cycle routes in Britain and Europe;
- Designation of major radial routes in and out of Bristol as "red routes";
- Assessing the impact of the removal of woodland for building;
- Feasibility of a site for perma-culture.

4. Other Organisations

There are other organisations that have taken students in the past. These include national parks, Countryside Agency, other universities' research departments and the Joint Strategic Planning and Transportation Unit which has been set up to take responsibility for strategic planning for the area of the former county of Avon. The English Historic Towns Forum is an organisation based within UWE, but can offer the student valuable work in the conservation field. No students have ever been placed within any government office.

The type of work carried out by students working for these organisations includes the following:

- An investigation of enforcement in a national park;
- Research into social housing provision in a university research department;
- Diversification in farming;
- Impact of markets on historic towns.

Description of the Project

The Agency Project is divided into three sections: Project Brief, Agency Report, and Reflective Essay

1. Introduction and Project Brief

All students are introduced to the Agency Project in the Autumn Term, and choice of work place must follow as quickly as possible. Following the choice, every attempt is made to match the students to their first choice agency, a process that can take anything from days to a few months. In ten years, all students have been placed, even if the university sometimes relies on familiar agencies to make a last minute arrangement.

As soon as the agency has indicated that it will take the student, the student then contacts the agency to arrange a meeting to discuss their project. The onus is on the student to arrange the meeting as soon as possible, following which a Project Brief (approximately 1000 words) will be written.

The Project Brief should outline the project, and is written in conjunction with the agency and the academic leader, and should include subject, title, objectives, method of approach, sources of material, time management schedule for 6 weeks, how the project fits into the actual work of the agency, and the name of contact within the agency and supervisor, if different. This must be checked by the project leader to guarantee that the learning outcomes will be met.

Students are encouraged to be realistic about what can be achieved in six weeks – the proposed project must be completed within a timescale that represents 6 weeks full time work. It is considered important that the brief is written for the project before the student starts work. It enables the student to perhaps do some early research prior to commencing work, and it prevents a week of valuable time being wasted when the student starts in the agency.

2. Agency Report

The Agency Report must be completed within the six week period, and as there is no word limit, the project must represent six weeks full time work. The precise nature of the report will have been agreed with the agency beforehand.

Agency projects to date have been very varied, and some examples are given above. The Agency Report is not an academic dissertation, but rather a practical piece of work, which is of use to the employer. However, because it is marked by the University, and it must follow certain guidelines:

- a. It must be concerned with some form of implementation;
- b. It must contain some analysis or recommendations for further action or new policy. It should not be just a survey, without any analysis;
- c. It must comply with the brief;

- d. It must be introduced properly and set into context with final conclusions, or recommendations, even if the agency considers this to be superfluous. For example, a survey or analysis of a particular area or sites must explain why the survey is being conducted, and how the student approached the study. An appeal statement, on the other hand is a self-contained document, and stands alone. If the student is producing a number of committee reports in a development control capacity, these should be introduced and then bound into one coherent report;
- e. It may not be relevant for example, to include within the report the background material. This should not, however, detract from the thoroughness with which a report is written;
- f. There is no guide length, but the report should reflect six weeks or 30 days full time work;
- g. The report should be a carefully prepared, well-presented, professional document. Students are encouraged to produce two or three copies - one for the agency and the second for handing in to the university for marking. Students are strongly recommended to produce at least one further copy to keep.

3. Reflective Essay

The third element of the Agency Project is a Reflective Essay. This was introduced after the first year of the Agency Project when it was realised that the work placement needed to allow for a period of reflection about work, and introducing students now to this practice will hopefully establish good habits for the future. The essay offers an opportunity for the student to reflect upon the six week experience of working within an agency. It should not be too personal, but should:

- a. reflect upon the nature and role of the agency within the planning process as a whole;
- b. set the work of the agency within the planning process;
- c. consider any proposals or changes that might affect or improve the role of the agency;
- d. reflect upon the relationship between the project and the theory and practice of implementation.

The guide length for the essay is 1500/2000 words.

Assessment of the Agency Project

The work is assessed by a team of tutors. Each student is allocated to one of these tutors, and any problems with the project should be discussed either with the tutor or with the module leader.

The assessment is based upon:

- i. structure, communication and good English;
- ii. the extent to which the substantive content is appropriate to the brief as agreed;

- iii. the extent to which the project reflects six weeks work;
- iv. the relevance and usefulness of the project to the agency;
- v. originality and thoroughness in the approach to the work.

Marks for the work are allocated as follows: Agency Brief: 10%, Agency Report: 65%, Reflective Essay: 25%.

Preparation Tutorials

In order to prepare students for the Agency Project and working life in general, 10 (weekly) tutorials are held, which aim to act as guidance and preparation for the project, and develop the professional and practical skills required for employment. In these sessions, students are introduced to the kinds of jobs that town planners do, and accompanying lectures on related issues are often given by practitioners. The aim is to broaden the students' perception that town and country planning is a narrow profession concerned either with the writing of policy or with development control, usually in a local authority. Students are required to think about the skills possessed by town planners which would prepare them for other jobs, whilst assessing their own skills, knowledge, experience and personal qualities. Hawkins (1998) suggests that gaining relevant work experience is probably the single most important thing a student can do at university to increase overall employability.

Work is done on presentation and interview skills, and students prepare for a mock interview, during which time they present to an interview board and answer questions. This is popular with students because it is filmed, allowing for feedback from tutors and for student and peer group appraisal. Copies of a video with feedback are available for students to keep, allowing them to re-assess their interview style. Students comment that this is difficult to do, but very helpful in retrospect. The preparation of CVs, the completion of application forms and more recently of references, take up three sessions. Some staff are engaged in the writing of large numbers of references, many of which are available for employees to read, especially in public authorities. It is considered useful to allow students to engage with their own references, enabling them to consider the kinds of qualities that employers might be seeking, and how their own strengths may be beneficial to the employer. Finally, students devise an approach to a typical project, outlining their methodology within a given time schedule.

Each tutorial group contains approximately 10 - 12 students, overseen by about 4/5 tutors associated with the project in total. Although the course leader arranges the placement, each tutor follows the progress of their own student, during the tutorial sessions and later when negotiating the brief for the project, during the project if there any problems (very rare), and marking all three sections of the Agency Project afterwards.

Discussion of the Advantages of this Type of Project

In a DfEE sponsored study of 21 undergraduate planning courses at British universities, carried out by the Discipline Network in Town Planning (1997), 3 had a sandwich year, 6 had a voluntary placement, 2 had no placement at all, and 8 had a type of integrated placement (2 of which universities no longer offer town planning as a subject). The Sandwich Year is

the type of placement most commonly referred to in the literature relating to work placements in general, although it is not so common in town planning. There is much debate amongst students about the advantages and disadvantages of a sandwich year. Students are divided upon the merits of this, but its main disadvantage is the fact that it lengthens a four year course to 5 years. The sandwich placement may not express specific learning outcomes, and they may not be tied to any particular assessment. Sandwich year placements demand a variety of assessment techniques, (Higgins and Simpson, 1997), the most common ones being the keeping of a diary or log book, a supervised visit from tutor, or a presentation at the end of the year. Davies (1990) considers that too much of this assessment may be based upon orthodox academic methods, with inadequate testing of "on-the-job" technical, personal and interpersonal skills.

Sandwich year placements are easy to find at present, but there is evidence that they are more difficult to find during a recession (Davies, 1990), partly because they are paid placements. It is true that the "year out" counts towards the two years work needed for full professional membership of the Royal Town Planning Institute, but salaries are lower for the sandwich year than those currently being offered to recent graduates. They are traditionally £12,000 – £14,000, whereas the new graduate can currently command anything from £15,000 to £22,000, depending upon the sector. There is further evidence that students find it difficult to return to studying after a sandwich year, and might not return at all. This has important ramifications for the profession, especially if professionally unqualified graduates are working as town planners. This is possible at present because of the shortage of planners, especially in local government.

Of other types of compulsory work placements, some are only one day a week; some investigate a particular issue or evaluate something without becoming an employee; some require a diary or log of experiences; some require a record of experience. Many other universities have voluntary schemes, in which the student is encouraged to find work during the vacation, sometimes with guidelines offered about how to write a letter, CV etc. Students are keen to point out that a shorter time would not produce the required learning outcomes. When the Agency Project was first introduced for the joint architecture and planning students, it was performed on 3 days per week for ten weeks. This model was not so successful as the six week full time placement, mainly because the students were unable to engage fully with the work place because for two days a week they returned to being students, and they were not spending all their time on the one project. In other words, they were not able to reflect fully upon their practice in the workplace as they retained two roles as employee and student.

It is suggested that among the integrated placements offered at universities the UWE placement is unique because it:

- is arranged by the university;
- is compulsory;
- is held during the academic year (ie. not in the vacation);
- prepares the student fully in a series of tutorials beforehand;

- demands that the student carry out one major project within the workplace, but two other pieces of work in association with it;
- is assessed as a module in its own right;
- contributes to the award of degree in town planning;
- assesses in a way that allows for some reflection regarding the relationship between theory and practice;
- benefits the employer.

Benefits to Employers

It is clear that there have to be benefits to employers to encourage them to participate in the scheme. Proof that these benefits exist must lie in the willingness of employers to engage in the project every year. The Agency Project has been operational for 13 years, and at least 10 agencies have participated every single year by taking at least one student. There is no requirement for the student to be interviewed, and this is actively discouraged, since it could result in some students being unable to find a placement. Employers seem happy to trust the judgement of the Agency Project leader, commenting that UWE students are well – prepared for work. This trust between the project organiser and the employers is founded on familiarity and a will for the project to succeed by both employer and student. Interestingly, it is rare for a student to under-perform during the Agency Project, but it could be that an employer is let down by a student who does not meet the required standards. Where this has happened, employers tend to attempt to assist the student with ways of improving his/her performance, and this has not deterred the employer from participating in the scheme the following year.

The university operates an employers' forum, during which ideas about education and its relevance to the workplace can be exchanged. Many employers in the region participate in this as well as other activities in the university. There is a willingness and desire by employers to become more involved with education and their local university, and relations are good, partly as a result of the Agency Project. A recent research project (UWE, 2001) that involved interviewing employers about work placements, for example, met with an excellent response rate from local employers, who wanted to contribute to the debate on this subject.

Many employers take UWE graduates, either immediately after the Agency Project, or at a later date. One firm has recently employed a planner with four years experience elsewhere because they remembered him from the Agency Project, during which he performed particularly well. No survey has been conducted of the employment rates of UWE graduates in the region, but there is anecdotal evidence that this is common, and particularly in a region like the South West, which has a strong identity and in which students seem to want to remain after completing their degrees.

One further way of assessing the success of the scheme for employers has been in the expansion of the project to include some post-graduates and more significantly, students studying for a joint award in architecture and planning. This course at UWE is attracting

large numbers of students, and in their fourth year they are required to conduct the work placement in an area related to town planning, (not architecture). Employers are willing to take architect-planners, in some instances as well as town planners in the same year (ie. at least 2 students), often on the basis that the two different groups bring different, but equally useful, skills to the job. Bristol City Council has taken up to 15 students to carry out their 6 week work placement within the authority, and has regularly taken as many as 12. In total, some 50 students have been placed in 2004, and this number is expected to rise in future. The intention remains to try to match all students with a work placement which enables them to develop their own specialist area.

It could be argued that work placements are easy to find at present, as there is a glut of jobs in planning-related activities. This may indeed be the case, as many practices and local authorities are finding it increasingly difficult to fill vacancies. Whilst this may make placing students easier, the project must not lose sight of its original aim of allowing for reflection in action by the student. The project must continue to insist upon students completing a discrete piece of work, and students must not be used as a general addition to the office to help out on many fronts. The project leader is aware of this as a potential problem, and good guidance for employers and students should ensure that this does not happen. It is important that the aims, objectives and learning outcomes of the project are kept in view, and that employers understand the contribution that the Agency Project makes towards planning education. At present, when there is a shortage of town planners, there may be a temptation for employers to use the final year student in a variety of ways to only reduce the workload for example, in a variety of menial tasks, or the work could be changed during the six week period to meet unexpected expediency. Employers who have been associated with the Agency Project do not do this.

Benefits to Students

At UWE, there is mainly anecdotal evidence of the success of the scheme, arising out of the enthusiasm of students to praise the placement. Davies, (1990) cites evidence of the benefit of supervised work placements (which are not sandwich years), which includes practical application of knowledge, personal development, intellectual development, specific skills development, along with staff and course development and students' future employment prospects. Many of these points are cited by students in feedback after the Agency Project. At UWE, Bristol, students are canvassed for their opinions about the Agency Project. There is almost universal praise for the scheme, and comments include:

"Provided me with an opportunity to ask myself whether I was capable of working in planning. The project made me realise I am capable of working and producing a project of real value."

"Excellent experience. I was really involved with the everyday practice of the company."

"I learnt a lot, and hopefully will be a better candidate for jobs."

"I had a positive experience. I had an exciting project on exit strategies as it is an area in which little work has been done."

"The project gave an interesting insight into local plan preparation which, I am sure, will be useful in future."

"The project was enjoyable and eye-opening in that I now feel that I can and will apply for jobs in, for example, community regeneration and community access, not just development control."

This last comment is of particular interest. Students have difficulty understanding the complexity and range of work available to the town planner. The Agency Project clearly helps students understand some of the variety of work being done by town planners in all sectors, and this will help broaden the students' horizons.

Further evidence of the success of the scheme must lie in the number of students who are offered work as a result of the project. Each year, at least 5 students are offered work as a result of their efforts within the same agency, and there is continuing evidence of students gaining employment over others at a later date because of a successful Agency Project (one example already cited above).

If the scheme was not successful, it could not survive, and the numbers involved bear witness to success, especially in the willingness of employers to continue to be involved, even now taking more than one student each year.

Quality Assurance

The project leader has been involved with the project since its inception, and during that time has evolved methods of implementing the Agency Project, which have included some evolution of the project itself. This has included, for example, the inclusion of a reflective essay, more structured tutorials, ceasing the need for the student to return to college during the placement. During the 13 years of the Agency Project, external scrutiny has taken place. This has included validation by the university of the whole course including the Agency Project, and by the university to allow the extension of the scheme to other courses, including post-graduate courses. Three professional bodies have been involved with the courses – the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI), the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) and the Institute of Logistics and Transport (ILT), and each has to accredit courses every five years, with shorter visits annually. The Agency Project has always been a source of interest to the professional bodies, and it has been commended by them on many occasions. Each year, external examiners scrutinise work in the university, and the Agency Project is always looked at in some detail, leading successive examiners to comment upon its success, and the high standards of work. The tutors involved have wide experience, both in academia and in practice, and are able to make the links between academic work and professional work.

Summary

The Agency Project is a work-based experiential learning module, which allows for reflection upon professional practice, peer-group discussion in pre-project and feedback sessions, and

the general sharing of ideas and best practice. It has been successfully operating for 13 years, contributing originally towards the degree in Town and Country Planning, and later extended to other related courses, including Architecture and Planning. It is unique, and could act as a model for other courses in town planning and other built environment professions which lend themselves to work-based learning. Its teaching method mainly relies upon experiential learning in the workplace, but role play exercises, skills development, and discussions beforehand are important, as well as feedback discussions and reflection on professional practice. It is assessed at level M in three ways, including for preparatory work, the project itself, which is done in the workplace, and for a reflective essay. It is assessed by academics, with no formal input from employers. It is worth 20 credits of study in a modular degree scheme, where 120 credits equates to one year's full time learning. It is popular and successful, the measurement for which deriving mainly from the willingness of employers to become involved; the numbers of employers who have remained loyal to the scheme for ten years; the anecdotal evidence from students; the high quality of work produced, commented upon by external sources and which is of use to the employer.

Future expansion could include more overseas placements, and students are beginning to see the value of these, especially when studying on a course which specialises in planning in a European context. Other skills may be necessary (languages), and UWE encourages the taking of a language as part of its degree programme in town planning.

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