

## **Developing Experiential Learning in the Built Environment: the Case of Social Housing**

**Martyn Pearl, Head of Housing and Community Services**

Isle of Wight Council, 7 High Street, Newport, Isle of Wight PO30 1SS

Tel: 01983 821000

### **Abstract**

This case study considers the development of practice and professional skills within the context of an academic programme of study. The case study focuses on the process of guided experiential learning at Oxford Brookes University, within which college-based students can be introduced into a practice environment in a structured and nurturing manner. This approach involves the completion of a programme practice studies both reflectively and analytically, whilst retaining links with academic study.

## Good Practice Points:

- In developing a placement, there is a need to be clear that it must serve the needs of the three parties to the 'contract', the student, the receiving organisation and the placing organisation.
- The placement should offer a practical basis for assessment, through which the development of a student's practical and professional skills might be tracked. For a vocationally orientated course, this offers an acid test of how students might translate from academic study to an applied setting.
- Students should be prepared as much as possible for the placement experience. For some, it may be their first taste of working in an operational environment. This can be achieved through both formal and informal sessions, and through previous year's students being invited to come back and share their experiences.
- The accompanying handbook must be produced in such a way as to provide the maximum guidance for students who will spend much of their time remote from the university. Such a system therefore requires that an effective support infrastructure is put in place.
- It is made clear to any potential placement organisation, that students are not cheap labour and that the programme must be properly constructed to cater for a variety of practice experiences, and appropriately supported.
- When commencing placements, students should have the opportunity early on to debrief their initial experience to their fellow students and to gain knowledge of how service delivery is conducted in other environments. This enables students to engage in a comparative analysis of cultural responses irrespective of whether they are placed in an inner urban area or a rural location.
- Support should be provided throughout the placement for the students. This should recognise the needs of individual students and provide safeguards against harassment, discrimination, exploitation and marginalisation.
- Most successful placement arrangements develop over time. It is productive to develop on-going relationships with good receiving organisations, which will get to understand the students and the placement requirements.
- Finally, it is important to establish a fail safe mechanism, i.e. a process for supporting or if something goes significantly wrong, removing students from a placement.

## Background

The rush for post war housing redevelopment geared towards replacing wartime destruction and sweeping away the slums, had the effect of producing a large stock of publically-owned housing, residing largely in the ownership of local authorities. The building boom was fuelled by a keenly competitive political commitment to produce the number of dwellings popularly demanded. It was delivered largely by technocrats (architects, engineers, surveyors) who were preoccupied more with technology and aesthetics than with any real knowledge or concern for the future occupants. The process of managing these dwellings once allocated, was perceived by many to be a largely administrative process, with little requirement for high-level professional skills. This appeared sustainable during the relative financial booms of the sixties and seventies, when resources were plentiful. However, the flaws in this approach were highlighted in the austerity years of the early 1980s when government expectations of the public sector radically shifted. Resources were severely reduced in parallel with the introduction of a policy agenda in which the public sector would be expected to improve significantly its management performance. This was clearly articulated by the Audit Commission in its 1986 report “Managing the Crisis in Council Housing”, which identified an underprofessionalised social housing sector, failing in key areas of housing management.

As a result, the Department of the Environment (DoE) established a programme of high-level housing education designed to attract high calibre graduates into the sector. Seven higher education institutions were each awarded fifteen studentships to deliver a postgraduate Diploma in Housing. This qualification was developed in conjunction with the Chartered Institute of Housing, leading to a professional qualification. However, a criterion for full corporate membership was that alongside a programme of academic study, students were also required to complete a period of practical application, hence the development of the housing placement. This involved students completing a structured programme of work experience in a mainstream housing organisation. Students on placement required a salary as their DoE grant only covered tuition fees in the final year, rather than fees and subsistence as in the first year. Organisations offering placements were making a significant commitment, in terms of funding and supervision for each placed student. They needed, therefore, to be convinced of its value.

## The Placement Rationale

The placement was also a pragmatic addition for the students. The majority of applicants for these courses in the early years, indicated that they found it impossible to get jobs in housing organisations with no practice experience. This highlighted a cultural divide, which was clearly evident, between housing practice and academia, with many practitioners having come ‘up through the ranks’ feeling suspicious of the need for new entrants with higher qualifications. Thus, in developing the placement, there were three specific issues to address:

1. It should provide a vehicle through which predominately young, inexperienced graduates could participate in the practical issues faced by housing

organisations. This needed to be a positive experience, offering space for reflection and analysis, rather than becoming repetitive and boring.

2. It should offer a practical basis for assessment, through which the University might track the development of a student's practical and professional skills. For a vocationally orientated course, this would offer an acid test of how students might translate from academic study to an applied setting.

It was this emphasis on reflection, analysis and social awareness that made the housing placement unique. In many other areas, placements are geared more towards achieving an established level of technical ability. In the housing placement, whilst a range of functional experience is required, a student's objectives could equally be met within a bad practice environment as a good one. The huge variation in the type of organisations offering placements meant that each was a highly tailored arrangement. Where practice or supervision was not up to expected standards, students were encouraged to consider how it could be improved and what they might learn from such an experience. There were however, some boundaries, and there were two occasions in which students were withdrawn from placements and those organisations no longer used.

3. It should provide a positive experience for the placement organisation. Students on placement would need to be paid and so receiving organisations should feel they were receiving value for money. Students should not be too great a burden on management resources, but rather, their presence should enable organisations to experience the benefits of having well trained and highly able staff working for them.

Initially, the placement was a compulsory element of a two-year, full time course. The first year was completely university based; the second year was a combination of taught units and the placement. At Oxford Brookes University, the placement model was different to other institutions, opting for a nine-month period during which students returned to the university for one day a week, rather than the more usual block model operated elsewhere. The benefit of this approach was that it enabled students on placement to get early and regular feedback from their peers about the range of experiences and support models being offered. It also enabled a taught programme to be developed which complemented the sort of experience being gained in the workplace and offered students the opportunity to locate their 'hands-on' experience within broader conceptual and analytical frameworks.

However, this has recently changed as the taught content of the Diploma has been pared down, leaving a full time placement which requires students to return to the university on six occasions, at the beginning and end of each of three terms. During these visits, students have the opportunity to debrief their experience to their fellow students and to gain knowledge of how service delivery is conducted in other environments. This enables students to engage in a comparative analysis of cultural responses to housing needs based on whether they are placed in a local authority or a housing association; in an inner urban area or a rural location. They also have a policy review briefing, which provides an appraisal

of current developments in social housing, during which they are able to 'annotate' national issues with specific reference to their own organisations. They are also provided with unstructured time, during which they are expected to meet with their personal tutor, access the library and make use of computing facilities.

Students arrange their placements whilst in their first, college-based year. This usually involves going through a process of completing application forms and attending competitive interviews. Their placement programme is developed within a tripartite negotiation involving student, employer and university. It is made clear to any potential placement organisation, that students are not cheap labour and that the programme must be properly constructed to cater for a variety of practice experiences, and appropriately supported. In between a student's return to the university, the university-based tutor will visit on-site and ensure that the agreed arrangements are working satisfactorily. Employers are invited into the university on three occasions throughout the year (once per term).

### **Practice Notebook**

The Practice Notebook is the assessed work for the practice studies. It was designed to achieve three objectives: to offer a structured period of work experience within a practice environment; to further develop the concept of the reflective practitioner (a key theme on the course) and to examine and evaluate a number of the key social theories within an operational setting. Students are provided with a detailed Practice Notebook specification, as is the workplace supervisor.

In completing their Practice Notebook, students are required to be reflective, critical and analytical throughout their placement. They are able to place their experiences into some context through discussions with college tutors and their peers in other organisations. They are guided through the more difficult incidents, with even the worst situations offering some learning experience. At the end of the programme, they are required to produce a summary reflection of their placement period, which would include reference to the ways in which their experience had shaped their approach to professional practice. In total, the Practice Notebook extends over six sections, relating to: student profile, experiential log, topic papers, supervisor reports, comparative studies and a final reflection.

Support is provided throughout for the students. In the period prior to obtaining the placement, a series of preparatory sessions are arranged during which they meet the previous year's placement students over an informal lunchtime; staff from the university's student services department offer guidance on the completion of CVs and with interview skills, and advice is provided on what to look for in a placement organisation and how to use the experience as a springboard for future career development.

### **The Barriers**

There are few actual barriers in convincing students to participate in placements. Most appreciate its value in complementing their academic qualities. This has become evident in recent years when the placement has become an optional element in the course; however,

most students choose to undertake one. However, it is usually more difficult to ensure that they properly engage with the process and use it in the most constructive manner. A proportion will find it hard to be openly reflective and to examine their feelings in a candid manner. This is addressed in part by the small group discussions that take place between the students when they return to the university, and by constant prompting and encouragement through the tutors.

In most instances, the level of reflection is a personal issue, depending on past experience of keeping diaries or other experiential logs. However, an important issue to the team of staff tutors is that such approaches to learning may also have cultural implications, with race and gender issues, which need to be addressed. Potential difficulties in these areas are identified during the first year, university-based part of the course, when students are required to complete a Professional Skills Programme, which is a series of exercises designed to orientate their thinking into reflective mode. Included within these exercises is the requirement to undertake two or three work shadowing sessions, to introduce gradually the workplace environment. This programme is a non-assessed document, which offers a vehicle for support and development between students and their personal tutors.

There are also potential barriers from the employers, who are usually well equipped to offer placements, but on occasion fail to structure the student's programme properly or perceive students as cheap labour. This is usually addressed through the regular dialogue between the university and workplace, as described above. On a very few occasions, issues of a racial or sexist nature have arisen, but these have been quickly resolved. No student would be allowed to remain in a situation in which they were being harassed or exploited.

### **Evidence of Success**

The Practice Notebook has undoubtedly proved successful over the period of time it has been offered. The main acid test is the marketability of students at the end of the course. Virtually all graduates from the course have obtained full time housing employment within a few months of completion. In a number of cases, the placement provides a unique opportunity for a mutual appraisal between organisation and student, leading to permanent employment at the end. A further endorsement comes from employers, many of whom return each year for further placements because of their satisfaction with the quality of the student and the relationship with the university.

A more anecdotal source of feedback comes from course alumni, who generally indicate that their placement experience was critical in getting their first permanent housing job.

### **How can other staff reproduce this?**

It should be borne in mind that running a successful placements regime is not a neutral option. It requires organisation, resourcing and commitment by the course team. Inevitably, the most successful placement arrangements develop over time, with organisations that understand the pressures and benefits from such an approach. Paradoxically, when housing studentships were at their height, institutions had a difficult task recruiting placement

opportunities. Ten years on from that point, many employers have become well aware of the benefits of students to their organisation, but the numbers of full time graduates going through the system has reduced substantially, in parallel with government funding.

There are also a number of technical and logistical issues involved in developing an assessment tool such as the Practice Notebook. The accompanying handbook must be produced in such a way as to provide the maximum guidance for students who will spend much of their time remote from the university. Such a system therefore requires an effective support infrastructure to be put in place. In addition to the site visits and Employers' Fora, mentioned earlier, staff student contact is also maintained via email and through the development of a dedicated web site for diploma students. This enables course related material to be posted and accessed remotely. Currently, no use has been made of video conferencing, but this may be considered at some future time.

Of equal importance is the establishment of a positive dialogue with local/regional employers and a clear vision of the criteria for an effective placement. Part of the reason for the change in placement structure, was a recognition through dialogue of the need to change professional education in the light of the changing workplace environment. Employers were clearly looking for shorter day-release courses on which to sent staff. This was also endorsed by the changing nature of the student cohorts applying for the housing courses. Firstly, many were coming with increasingly developed skills, particularly around C&IT, but also with experience of related voluntary work. Secondly, as studentship funding was reduced, more and more full time students became self-funding, on a tight financial regime.

One of the aspects of the Practice Notebook that has changed over time is the movement away from an emphasis on bulk, to a more measured approach that values critical analysis. It has also helped students to concentrate more on the key issues rather than concentrate on detail. Thus, with the experiential log, the requirement was reduced from weekly entries to three, single term-based entries. The range and coverage of the Practice Notebook would remain. It has the effect of meshing together operational knowledge with theory and concept.

### **Details about Quality Assurance**

Quality assurance is undertaken through two principal means. Firstly, the on-going tripartite dialogue between student, tutor and workplace supervisor usually means that one or more of the parties identify problems and difficulties fairly quickly. This is further strengthened by the existence of the employers' forum that meets once a term. This provides a forum in which employers are able to share their experience as users of the Brookes placement system, both positive and negative.

The second area of quality assurance is through the scrutiny of the external examiners who examine all completed documents and where appropriate interview students. Completed Practice Notebooks are also sent to workplace supervisors, not for marking, but for an overall assessment of the accuracy of the material in the organisational context. Inevitably, there will be occasions where students wish to be critical of their organisation or specific staff

members and where they might feel compromised if sensitive material was made public. In such circumstances, there is the flexibility to produce two separate pieces of work, one unexpurgated and the other sanitised.

Both students and employer are also asked for general reflections on the perceived success of the placement arrangements. It is important for the course team to be as reflective as the students and to learn by mistakes.

## Summary

From the experience of ten years placements at Oxford Brookes University, the endorsement of students, employers and academics alike would indicate that course-based practice experience offers significant benefits across the board. It offers a bridge between academe and practice, develops both personal and professional skills and improves the quality of professional practice.

However, there are also a number of issues that need to be addressed to ensure that the experience remains positive:

1. The need for clear, unambiguous guidance for students
2. Clearly negotiated criteria for the placement with employers
3. Recognition of the needs of individual students and safeguards against harassment, discrimination, exploitation and marginalisation
4. The need for good lines of communication with students. The less time spent in an education institution, the better the mechanisms that are required. The opportunities offered by C&IT are considerable.
5. The establishment of a fail safe mechanism, i.e. a process for supporting or if something goes significantly wrong, removing students from a placement.

## The Author

Martyn Pearl was Director of the Housing Studies Unit at Oxford Brookes University. He has now taken up post as the Head of Housing and Community Services at the Isle of Wight Council.