OUTSTANDING TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT TECHNICAL SKILLS NATIONAL PROGRAMME

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INTRODUCTION

Harlow College is dedicated to supporting all students undertake meaningful learning to progress to skilled employment, apprenticeships and higher-level study. In response to our close collaboration with employers and other education providers, this extension project focuses on the important role of work placements." This extension project was devised by Harlow College to take forward issues identified by practitioner managers of an earlier OTLA project and to respond to the need to link technical skills development and assessment within the new T Level Industry Placement.

CONTEXT

In preparing for the introduction of T Levels, our first OTLA project participants considered the learner entitlement to a high quality, substantial work placement integral to T Levels and required for full certification. Participants are adapting to this major shift in post-16 practice but identified a critical need which is:

How do we ensure learners get the opportunity to put technical skills into practice through the placement? and how do we assess this skill improvement?

The project specifically worked with manager practitioners in two curriculum areas to identify how the curriculum can best prepare students for extended work placements and support them whilst participating by:

- Disseminating and building upon good practices identified by the original OTLA project in respect of developing young people in terms of work readiness;
- Developing assessment models to track, monitor and measure the technical skills students develop in the workplace whilst on extended work placements;
- Developing methods and materials to support employers in their appraisal of the student’s performance;
- Disseminating the outcomes of the project widely so that the models developed can be taken into T Levels.

The two curriculum areas involved in the project were Engineering and Health and Social Care: two sectors where there is an unmet need for trained staff.

Harlow College led the project and collaborated with Colchester Institute and SEEVIC from the first project, and new partners Havering College and Northampton College. Our project worked directly with 10 managers, 12 other staff, over 400 learners and 6 employers.

APPROACH

The partners began by researching and sharing their own and each other’s’ practice in preparing students for work experience and recording the progress they made. These were shared on padlet wall that all partners could access. There were lots of generic materials devised for use across colleges which focused on students making contact with their placement, improving their skills of communication, timekeeping, taking instruction etc. and the resources recently published under ‘The Challenge’ project (devised from the early piloting of Industry Placements) also covered many general employment skills thoroughly. But for this project, we

1 https://www.aoc.co.uk/industry-placements-guidance-resources
wanted to address the specific technical skills that we would expect students to have acquired on their course and then apply and improve once they were on placement for between 45-60 days.

**We therefore extended our research to include student and employer views:**

This included collaboration with employers to explore their views on the curriculum and the 'readiness' of students for work placements.

We also shared how we developed the technical skills students need to be effective in the workplace. This included ensuring students had mastered some very basic skills such as correct clinical handwashing and measuring engineering parts with accuracy, alongside using 'live' employer scenarios to bring the theory to life.

**FINDINGS**

Our findings from the initial research enabled us to create improved resources for staff to use with students in preparing them for their work placement. These were tested with staff and students and reviewed by employer partners who made some useful suggestions.

The project then explored the role of skills development for students whilst on placement and how this could be captured. Again, there are many examples of capturing a student’s improvement in their general employability skills of communication, work ethic, health & safety etc. through workplace logs and diaries and in some cases these skills were endorsed by a report from the employer.

‘I complete all tasks on time and ask for help when needed.’

However, this project worked on the premise that an extended, 60-day placement, should result in a significant development of sector specific technical skills and the challenge was how to capture this. In a few colleges the qualification specification provided a specific work experience unit but this was not the case for all courses or students. We also wanted to involve students, teachers and employers in the assessment of these technical skills.
Our research had identified general self-assessment tools that students often completed before and after work experience and various open-ended diaries/log books that encouraged students to record and reflect on their experience. In order to develop more technically specific tools, we looked to the apprentice standards where we found clear technical learning outcomes.

‘I am able to plan a mechanical operation, interpreting job instructions, drawings and specifications’

This resulted in two skills checklists that combined both generic employment skills along with technical skills that a Level 3 student on an industry placement might be expected to apply. By using the apprenticeship standards, we hoped to anticipate the course content of the emerging T Level curriculum. But also by discussing with employers we were able to shape the curriculum (through the preparation of students for work placement) to better match their skills needs.

Our research and testing of the checklist confirmed our understanding of the very different levels of commitment that an employer could make in supporting and assessing the student. This often reflected the size of the company and whether they had experience with assessing apprentices or supporting their own staff through other training programmes. We therefore created something that at worst would be a simple scoring sheet and at best include detailed evidence and smart targets for further development.

XXX is doing an excellent job. He shows great enthusiasm in all the tasks he is given. He gels well within the workforce and he tells me that he really likes the work. He has done setting and operation of metal saw, deburring of tube on dedicated machine and stainless-steel cleaning with dedicated machine.

When the health and social care skills checklist was trialled in Colchester Institute, 19 of the 42 on placement were able to get their employers to complete their part. This enabled an analysis of pre and post work experience skills scores and a small improvement was found. Interestingly, a comparison of the student’s self-assessment of their skills pre and post work placement showed that sometimes a student had revised their score downwards because they were not as skilled as they thought they were. Moving forward, this ‘reality’ check should prove valuable in directing students towards areas that they need to work on.

WHAT WE LEARNT

The project created and tested teaching materials for use in preparing students for placement. Also in use were IAG records to support work placement officers in matching students to
placement opportunities and skills checklists for use before and after placement. These resources can be found on the AoC website alongside this case study.

**Student Experience**
Our research with students through surveys and focus groups proved invaluable. We found their pre-placement concerns around what the place would be like, what duties they would have and what they should wear etc were quite straightforward and predictable. These were the issues that most resources used for preparing students for placements covered. The post placement research however uncovered some very specific concerns which our learners experienced and which our resources hadn’t fully prepared our students for. In health and social care, learners wanted more specific guidance on working within their scope, including:

- Could they feed or lift a service user?
- Could they assist them if they fell?
- How should they respond to service users using racist or sexist language?
- How should they adapt their behaviour for a service user with dementia?
- What activity would warrant them following the ‘whistle-blowing’ guidance?

Students felt a frequently asked questions section – that they could access on their phone - would be helpful.

Our focus groups were also asked about any gender barriers in the workplace as both sectors have an imbalance of genders amongst their staff. Students did not report this is as an issue but one group did make us aware of strong cultures occurring in some of their placements which made them feel excluded.

Our improved pre-placement teaching resources were well received and whilst we were only able to collect limited survey data in the lifetime of the project, each college felt the students were better prepared. One college who were sending engineering students out for the first time felt the quality of the resources contributed to a high-quality learning experience reflected in all students completing their placement.

‘I am enjoying the placement, everyone is friendly and encouraging and I enjoy going in to placement. I have done quite a few things there but what is really good is that I asked to be taught on a manual vernier calliper and they taught me how to use it, so now I clearly understand how to use it, then in lesson, I showed one of the other students how to use it, which made me feel great as I could pass on what I have learnt to other people.’

**Practitioners experience**
The revised student placement handbook and teaching resource were well received by teachers who thought they improved the preparation of students in the workplace. Those teachers who made at least one workplace visit as part of the project felt they were able to deliver these lessons and address student concerns more effectively. In two colleges employers were brought into lessons prior to their work placements and this addressed the student concerns about employer expectations identified in our surveys and focus groups.

To address student concerns about service users with dementia, one college linked with Dementia Friends to put on a session for the students:

‘Now our students, when they go on placement, are much more comfortable around service users with dementia. Nick Nelson, Colchester Institute.'
Teachers found completing the skills checklist relatively straightforward, and in some cases, made a change to one or two of the technical skills to more accurately reflect the skills the student had developed at that stage of the course.

**Employer experience**

As a large and diverse employer, Princess Alexander was an excellent organisation to work with and we were able to draw on their considerable experience of offering work experience, volunteering and training.

“As an employer we were pleased to be asked and very happy to contribute to this important project. We are committed to offering quality placements to our local young people in the anticipation that they will consider the NHS as their future career of choice.” - Martin Smith, AD Training, Education and Development  
- The Princess Alexandra Hospital NHS Trust.

Employer feedback on our resources and our skills development was very useful and, in some cases, very specific.

‘There needs to be more included around infection control.’

They reminded us of the time pressures on them and the impact of this on supporting students on placements. They supported the idea of a simple skills checklist as a starting point.

Some employers also needed significant support in making the placement meaningful for the student. The technical skills listed on the checklists went some way in directing employers in activities for the student but we also directed employers to ‘The Challenge’ resources.

‘One of the best things of the project was a greater focus on employer engagement. Employers views were added to the handbook and they came in and contributed to students being prepared for their placements. Student feedback in the surveys and focus groups was that this was the most valuable part of their learning.’ - Sarah Wilding, Havering College.

**Key lessons**

- Students are now better prepared for their work placements as a result of the project.
- We found this preparation needed to be both sector and company specific. Where students had been prepared with general resources, they felt less prepared for their placement.
- Capturing the knowledge of the students when they return from placement was very effective in preparing the next group. We will look to record this centrally in each organisation and so build up practical hints and tips.
- Engaging with employers meant we had to look at things from their perspective and recognise that their commitments to supporting students on placements varied enormously.

**Take-away messages**

- Every industry placement is different and resources and approaches must be flexible enough to cope with this. Colleges need to review their processes to ensure there is
sufficient care taken in matching placements and every placement needs an individual learning plan, linked to the student and the company.

- As more colleges appoint placement officers to manage the growing work placement requirements, including meeting with employers and visiting companies, teaching staff are moved further away from current work place experience. Whilst most colleges could not afford to have teaching staff arranging the placements, co-locating the placement officers in the staff rooms and ensuring all teachers visited at least one workplace each year were strategies adopted to address this challenge.

‘One of the lessons learned is to continue to build links between our placement and curriculum teams so there is a seamless integration between the placement and the learning from the placement so I would urge you to continue to develop these links.’
Jason Lancaster, Northampton College.

‘In engineering one member of the teaching staff took back the arranging of placements and we had a really high success in terms of gaining skills and staying on placement.’ - James Parker - SEEVIC College.

Next steps
- All colleges in the project have now revised their approach and resources for work placement in the sectors explored. Some of the partners have also taken lessons from the project and extended them to practice across their whole organisation.

- In response to student's anxiety about heading to placement, SEEVIC College plan to go back to their employers and create 360° virtual reality videos of the work spaces so the students have the full experience of what the placement is like before they go.

- Harlow College is now moving forward with a Teach Too and a Taking Teaching Further project where we are seeking to develop employer-led curriculum development and delivery and the upskilling of teaching staff through industry placements. As employers become key players in the development and delivery of technical skills, the practicing and assessment of these skills in the workplace should become a natural progression.