

DISTINGUISHED EDUCATION EXCELLENCE AWARDS

Category: Professional Practice Innovation Award

Section B: Case Study

Title: *Empowered Students, Tasty Sandwiches: The promise of a multi-stakeholder approach to learner support*

Summary: The case study outlines the processes, outcomes and impacts of a teaching approach that empowered placement-seeking undergraduates securing their ‘sandwich placements’ with greater ease in 2019. It describes a successful approach that systematically engaged various groups of key stakeholders in empowering learners. It relates to the **Civic Contribution** priority of the Five & Fifty strategic plan, achieves **Meaningful Networks, Teaching Excellence and Student Experience** objectives, while demonstrating the corporate value, **Collaboration**. A set of activities were designed to support students so that they find suitable, subject-specific industry placements on or before the start of the following academic year. As a result, the entire class of students secured their placements on time.

Key words: Research-Informed Teaching, Multi-stakeholder approach, Placement students

What was done:

I used a multi-stakeholder engagement approach to design and deliver a module that accelerated students securing placements. When ‘unplaced’ students lost hope and required additional support, I rebranded them as ‘placement-seekers’ and organised an innovative conference for them. **It is in making ‘the unplaced students’ as central part of an interventional design, and in finding a collaborative solution to the identified problem, the case becomes innovative.** This approach had an excellent impact on placement-seekers’ learning experience.

Motivation and aims:

Students on a four-year, BSc HRM degree are required to undertake a year-long internship, doing HR-related roles in an organisation, during their third year (hence, ‘sandwich’ placements). BSc HRM is the only programme that specifies placements as compulsory, and students failing to secure placements cannot continue their programme. Therefore, it is critical that they are adequately prepared both to perform well in selection interviews and to embed themselves quickly in the real-world context of HR practice. Both as module coordinator and the HRM placement tutor, I designed several activities to achieve these aims. This case study summarises my approach.

My practice is underpinned by transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2009) and phenomenographic theory of learning (Marton and Booth, 1999). The use of educational technology is guided by Laurillard’s (2012) frameworks and the feed forward methods, by Walker (2013).

Implementation:

1. Designing and planning module plan and learning activities

When I inherited the module, I engaged with the HRM Course Director (who had also delivered this module previously), the staff at the Centre for Digital Learning, career consultants, past HRM students, seniors who are currently in the final year BSc HRM degree, and many local employers. I engaged with the empirical literature on sandwich placement students (e.g. Jones, Green, Higson 2017; Klein & Weiss, 2011) and designed a research-led module plan, in line with Botma et al. (2015) framework. I completed learning analytics training and identified ‘at-risk’ students from predictive learning analytics data. Then, a 12-weeks teaching schedule was designed in such a way that every skill-development session of mine, was followed by a stakeholder-led a support session, which resulted in making learning more meaningful.

2. Teaching and supporting learning (highlights only)

Activities	Outcomes
Debunked the belief that ‘following your passion is the key to career success’ with an alternative idea that emphasises ‘be good at something, start creating meaning and value, and let the passion follow you in your quest to become who you want to be’ (Newport, 1999)	Increased responsibility for owning personal learning processes.

Taught 'Growth Mindset' and increased awareness on what drives their motivation and achievement (Dweck, 2006)	Enhanced understanding of fixed mindsets and of the need to developing a growth mindset.
Met the 'at-risk' students when suitable to them, and coached them in interview techniques	Stronger bond between the lecturer and students that increased motivation in learners to develop new skills

3. Assess and give feedback to learners.

Conducted an actual 'Assessment Centre' exercise in real-time, where student groups were observed and scored by employer-led panel, who later 'Feed Forward' students	Improved levels of self-confidence. Stronger demonstration of more-focused career search strategies.
Used a range of interactive educational technological tools (e.g. Padlet, FlipGrid, Nearpod, Mentimeter, Socrative, Google Forms, and Panopto) creatively to ignite discussions and to provide instant, real-time feedback.	Empowered students' voice; enhanced interactive response and collaborative learning. Increased student engagement.

Aided by these activities, most students secured their placements, during their second year. However, around 15 of them were struggling to secure placements; their self-confidence depleted and they were losing hope. This situation demanded a new approach to providing support.

4. Developing effective learning environments and approaches to student support and guidance.

When unplaced students needed additional support, I organised a '**HRM Placement-seekers Mini conference 2019**' (See a link below). Several employers who advertised their placement vacancies on the university's internal portal were invited so that both the students and employers meet each other face-to-face, outside a selection interview context. I requested employers to bring their placement students, who have been working for them. During the conference, with the help of a career development consultant (Mrs Cathy Moore), HRM course director (Mr Ian Smyth), and Placement Executive Assistant (Mrs Karen Beattie) we engaged in confidence-building conversations. The employers coached the students and others encouraged them to re-tell a different story. This event turned out to be transformative, as the students began to see their vulnerabilities in a new light and start building their confidence. All participants found this event relevant and useful. Within the following two months, all students of this cohort (n=51), including those who attended this conference secured HRM placements. The last student, who has been naturally shy and introverted, and who had applied for at least 40 placements but failed until this conference, got his placement in the penultimate week of the start of the new academic year, and sent this mail:

Hello Guys,

... I had an interview with HSC Belfast Services Organisation at 11.30 this morning and they are just off the phone offering me the placement!!

I am over the moon, I can't thank you enough for your help and keeping me motivated/positive during the rejection I've had to deal with through the process.

.... Sitting in the office with Ian at the start of August bought a reality hit that I might be sitting here without a placement - but I'm glad to say I've done it. (Personal communication, 17/09/19)

Professor Mark Durkin appreciated this effort in a Board Meeting and students' positive evaluations are documented in a website (Link below).

5. Engaging in continuing professional development (CPD) in subjects and their pedagogy

To gain the best value from the placement experience, all students need to be continuously supported 'during' their placements. Therefore, in the spirit of contributing to supervisors' CPD, '**HRM placement supervisors' support workshop**' was organised to equip new lecturers with all the information needed for them to empower placement students. This new workshop was informative and was found useful (website link below).

"Many thanks for today it was very useful."

Dorothy McKee, Associate Senior Lecturer (Personal Communication, 20/01/20)

I am confident that, with the support of the academic supervisors, students will return to Ulster as more confident individuals who have developed a desire for continuous learning (O'Donovan, 2018), and will gain an advantage in their final year performance (as demonstraed in Gomez, Lush and Clements, 2004).

What worked

- Collaborating with key stakeholders did work. When asked to help our students, all stakeholders willingly supported, almost, always.
- Working closely with the Course Director and other internal stakeholders is the Key to introduce similar initiatives.

Challenges

- Some students start slow and get tired of trying. Keeping them motivated can be tricky.
- Some stuck in a story about why they cannot be extraordinary. To help them refocus on the 'why' of what they do is challenging.

Evaluation and Evidence of Impact:

- Perception measures were taken, and findings are on the event website (link below)
- Outcomes: All 51 students (except the two, who took Leave of Absence for personal reasons) secured their placements before the start of their academic Year 3.
- Academic supervisors who visited placement students at their respective companies indicate that the students have been enjoying their sandwich placements, as they immerse in the in a real workplace, and learn about what it is like working as a HR professional. *Empowered students, enjoying sandwiches.*

Long term Impact: Learning has become relevant and transformative; stronger relationship has been built with local businesses and organisations that promise continuing placements for future HRM students; possible enhancement of institutional reputation through better prepared students / high-performing HRM juniors.

Transferability:

The approach is transferable. The conference format, workshop templates, and teaching approaches can be modelled in other departments, and with minimum effort. Creating a meaningful collaboration between placement tutor, course director, career development consultant and admin staff holds the key to successful replication.

Suggestions to colleagues

- When teaching becomes research-informed and industry-inspired, students learn well, and it works.
- A multi-stakeholder approach to placement-seeking students' learning makes a difference.

Further information:

The innovative multi-stakeholder event '**HRM Placement seekers' mini conference 2019**' – Report here:

<https://pjoseph-richard.wixsite.com/hrmpsmc2019>

'**HRM placement supervisors' support workshop**' – Report here:

<https://pjoseph-richard.wixsite.com/pssw2020>

All references used in this form here: https://ulster-my.sharepoint.com/:w:/r/personal/p_joseph-richard_ulster_ac_uk/Documents/2019-20Teaching%20Excellence%20Award%20Files/References.docx?d=w9c4a0dbc203f4adda5b9d3fc78ad955b&csf=1&e=qup889

https://ulster-my.sharepoint.com/:v:/r/personal/p_joseph-richard_ulster_ac_uk/Documents/2019-20Teaching%20Excellence%20Award%20Files/MLM.mp4?csf=1&e=lvc3Cb

A transferable design of the module, week-by-week teaching plan can be found here:

https://learning.ulster.ac.uk/webapps/blackboard/content/listContentEditable.jsp?content_id=4753143_1&course_id=294181_1

Professor Durkin's video, appreciating this 'additional effort' in supporting students. Watch from 00.17 to 1.13:

https://ulster-my.sharepoint.com/:v:/r/personal/p_joseph-richard_ulster_ac_uk/Documents/2019-20Teaching%20Excellence%20Award%20Files/MLM.mp4?csf=1&e=lvc3Cb

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