EXTRACT FROM LEARNING AND TEACHING COMMITTEE MINUTES

**1 April 2015**

15.14Work Experience (Item 3i)

The Committee at its December meeting had advised that the Sub-Committee would provide further guidance on models of compulsory work-based learning in all Honours (including integrated Master’s) degrees (min 14.101 refers.) The Committee noted that the Work Experience Working Group had concentrated on providing guidance on achieving a compulsory component but planned to look at the monitoring of placement and to update University work experience guidelines.

The Committee was asked to consider five proposed Guiding Principles to help course teams in the development of proposals to meet the requirement. The term ‘compulsory work-based learning’ was to be used rather than ‘placement’ to avoid potential confusion with the sandwich year. Professor McMullan emphasised that there was no requirement to introduce a sandwich year and the guidance was not prescriptive in terms of duration. Examples of innovative practice had been provided to assist faculties and best practice would need to be widely disseminated. It was noted that the working group still had to consider and provide advice on other issues related to the introduction of work-based learning such as indemnity insurance.

The Committee noted that the projected increase in the required number of work-based learning opportunities was taking place at a time when there was increased competition for limited places and that there was a need to explore opportunities outside Northern Ireland. It was recognised that it might not be possible to secure subject-related work-based learning in some subject areas but that their students could still be provided with appropriate opportunities to develop their employability skills. It was therefore suggested that ‘to the subject area’ should be removed from Principle 1. Also, given that work-based learning settings would differ, it was suggested that not all students would have ‘mentors’ and that this expectation should be removed from Principle 3.

The Chair clarified that, although compliance with the Guiding Principles was not a University requirement, they should be viewed as being University expectations which were the appropriate considerations for course teams to take into account in developing compulsory work-based learning opportunities.

The Committee noted that in certain circumstances study abroad might be considered as meeting the University requirement for work-based learning in accordance with the Principles, but there were potential difficulties in designing into the curriculum such a work-based learning activity that the full cohort could be expected to undertake. The Working Group would wish to consider this matter further.

AGREED: that, taking account of the suggested amendments, the Principles be endorsed as follows:

* Work-based learning opportunities should be relevant and provide an authentic and meaningful context for experiential learning[[1]](#footnote-1).
* Work-based learning should support student learning and provide an awareness of the current graduate market place.
* Work-based learning opportunities should provide a supportive environment with access to a network of experienced colleagues.
* Work-based learning opportunities should provide a context for students to practise and reflect on real issues leading to applicable learning and critical thinking[[2]](#footnote-2).
* Work-based learning and assessment should be integrated in a valid and reliable way; and linked to the development of relevant employability skills and the Ulster graduate qualities.

**9 December 2014**

14.101 Final Year Dissertation/Project and Compulsory Placement in Undergraduate and Integrated Master’s Degrees (Mins 14.84 and 14.41)

The Committee had recommended to Senate that Faculties make provision for a final year dissertation/project module and a period of placement as compulsory components in all undergraduate and Integrated Master’s degree programmes from the September 2015 intake with further guidance on the latter to be developed by the Sub-Committee on Employability.

…

Senate had noted that the provision of a period of placement as an integral part of the curriculum presented challenges for some areas. It had considered the use of the term ‘placement’ misleading as a variety of methods of providing relevant work experience was possible and this would need to be appropriate to the individual course/subject. Senate had agreed that the intention and potential range of activities should be defined in guidance to Faculties and that study abroad might be able to fulfil the objective. The proposal to include compulsory work-based learning (once defined) in all courses had therefore been agreed in principle on the understanding that the detail would be worked out with Faculties over the remainder of the current academic year with implementation at an appropriate stage thereafter, not necessarily from the September 2015 intake.

The Chair said that there had been extensive discussion regarding how this requirement might be met and confirmed that further guidance on models would be provided by the Sub-Committee on Employability.

**15 October 2014**

14.84 COMPULSORY PLACEMENT AND FINAL YEAR DISSERTATION/PROJECT IN UNDERGRADUATE AND INTEGRATED MASTER’S DEGREES

The Committee at its June meeting had been disappointed to note that the number of courses providing placement in 2012/13 had decreased overall. This was a matter of concern given the emphasis of both the University and DEL on student employability. The Committee had also recognised the contribution of placement to future graduate-level employment, which was an important factor affecting the University’s position in various league tables. Another factor, further study was influenced by students’ experience of their own research-led enquiry through the final year dissertation or project, and the Committee noted that the University was below its benchmark in this regard.

The Committee had, therefore, recommended to Senate that, in principle, a period of placement and a final year dissertation/research project be integral parts of the curriculum for all undergraduate Honours and integrated Master’s degree programmes (min 14.41 refers). Deans were asked to report back to this meeting on the implications of these proposals for their provision and their plans and timeframe to achieve them.

The Committee considered the Faculty responses (Paper No LTC/14/24) and acknowledged that the policy would present challenges for a minority of courses. A number of general issues had been identified and it was thought that clarification and guidance would be needed, particularly in relation to placement. The University would not dictate arrangements to achieve these outcomes but would expect Faculties to explore options and adopt appropriate solutions.

Placement

The Chair reminded Faculties that the University’s Employability and Marketing Strategy included the expectation that by 2020 all students at Ulster should have the opportunity to undertake work experience as part of their programme of study and this would be expected to be one of the key features defining the Ulster Student Experience in undergraduate degrees. It was noted that those courses which had recently introduced placement had seen benefits in the overall curriculum through enhanced industry/employer relations and closer links with University alumni.

Professor McAlister emphasised the need for the University to advance its ambitions and to give greater priority to this in the short to medium term, particularly in view of the evidence of the positive impact that placement had on student performance and subsequent employment.

The Sub-Committee on Employability and relevant central departments would be expected to work closely with Faculties and to provide appropriate guidance. The Chair confirmed that a period of study abroad would not be counted as work experience, and that the Committee’s recent discussions regarding paid placements related to year-long placements (min 14.39 refers).

Dissertation/Project in Final Year Honours Degrees

With regard to the dissertation/project, it was noted that the University’s previous expectation was that in an Honours degree programme one or more modules were normally assessed by dissertation. A special case had to be made at validation or by CA3 to the Faculty to depart from this principle. In line with the new principle, a special case would no longer be allowed and such dissertation/project modules would require to be clearly identified within the course. The Chair acknowledged that the need for ethical approval of projects could present an impediment in some subject areas, but advised that in such instances students might be directed to undertake projects which analysed secondary data available, for example through NISRA.

The Vice-Chancellor confirmed that those courses which currently did not make provision for placement and/or a final year dissertation/project now needed to bring forward proposals to do so. Subject to Senate approval of the recommendation, he indicated that failure to do so would put at risk the future continuation of the course.

AGREED:

1. that it be further recommended to Senate that Faculties make provision for a period of placement and a dissertation/project module (in final year) as a compulsory component in all undergraduate and Integrated Masters’ degree programmes **from the September 2015** **intake** and that Faculties aim to introduce as soon as possible optional periods of placement and dissertation/project modules for existing students on programmes where these were not currently provided;
2. subject to Senate approval of i) above, Faculties consider these matters and ensure that course/subject teams, which do not already meet these objectives, take appropriate steps to achieve them and to present proposals through the submission of CA3 forms or in documentation for forthcoming validation events;
3. that the Sub-Committee on Employability develop further guidance on the options for introducing periods of placement within undergraduate Honours and Integrated Master’s degrees.

**18 June 2014**

14.41 Monitoring of Placement

The Committee noted that approximately one-third of full-time undergraduate degrees had a year-long placement and, while there had been a small increase in the number of students taking the year in 2012/13, the number of courses providing placement had decreased. This was a matter of disappointment and concern given the emphasis of both the University and DEL on student employability, through the Learning and Teaching Strategy and DEL’s HE Strategy with the latter expecting all students to have the opportunity to undertake a period of work placement whilst undertaking a higher education course (Graduating to Success 4.3).

It was further recognised that the placement experience contributed to future graduate-level employment, which was an important factor affecting an institution’s position in various league tables. Another factor, further study, was influenced by students’ experience of research-led enquiry through their own final year dissertation or project. While this was an expectation of the University’s degrees, course teams were currently permitted not to include one if they could demonstrate to validation panels how its outcomes were met elsewhere in the curriculum.

It was noted that the University appeared to be losing ground against these particular measures. The Vice-Chancellor recommended that placement and the dissertation/ project should both be compulsory elements in undergraduate honours degree programmes. It was noted that other institutions had made such strategic decisions and had seen benefits. Different placement models existed which might accommodate those subject areas where year-long placements were considered problematic. An imaginative approach as well as using the existing alumni network and broadening students’ horizons through seeking opportunities outside Northern Ireland would help. Deans were generally supportive of the proposals but recognised the challenges that they would represent.

AGREED that:

1. it be recommended to Senate that, in principle, a period of placement and a final year dissertation/research project be integral parts of the curriculum for all undergraduate and integrated Master’s degrees;
2. Deans report back by October 2014 on the implications of these proposals for their provision and plans and timeframe to achieve them.

1. Association of Business Schools (ABS), Chartered Institute if Management (CMI) (2014) available from: <http://www.associationofbusinessschools.org/sites/default/files/21st_century_leaders_june2014_-_final_report.pdf> (Accessed 20 January 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. QAA Scotland (2010) Available from: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/AboutUs/Documents/WBL_Guidelines.pdf> (Accessed 20 January 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)