

# DEVELOPING GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES THROUGH A CREDIT BEARING PLACEMENT COURSE



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## SUMMARY

The School of Interdisciplinary Studies at the Dumfries Campus of the University of Glasgow has offered a placement course at undergraduate degree for many years. As a result, there is now a strong partnership between the university and most local environmental organisations, who are keen to have students on placements and who see them as future employees. There is the potential therefore for our students to boost local employment levels, and some of our graduates have successfully applied for positions in local environmental companies. The placement course is in lieu of a dissertation, worth 60 credits, and is available in semester 2 of the third year; about 70% of the cohort choose the placement option. Students have 300 credits and have acquired sufficient knowledge and understanding and practical skills to be of benefit to the placement organisation. As part of the teaching before students go out on placement, students write personal learning goals which are explicitly linked to the university's graduate attributes matrix (University of Glasgow, 2023a). During the placement, the students keep a work-based journal within which they track the process of the personal learning goals and when achieved (or if they become irrelevant to the work undertaken) they create new goals. The benefits to the students are the articulation of their attainment of graduate attributes onto the CV and into their letters of application for the next stage of their career.



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## CONTEXT



- Year 3 undergraduate student
- BSc Environmental Science and Sustainability
- <25 students

Rationale: The degree was created with the opportunity for students to gain employability skills in the form of a work-based placement course worth 60 credits. This is an invaluable opportunity for the student to experience the work undertaken in an environmental organisation of interest. Sometimes students have perceptions of an organisation and being able to work for that organisation for 8 weeks supports the student in their career choices i.e., it is not the career for them, or it is the career for them. Understanding how the work they undertake can be used for employability purposes was strengthened by the explicit linking of the graduate attributes to the personal learning goals. Initially students had difficulty writing personal learning goals and relating them to the graduate attributes. The task in subsequent year was made easier by including examples from previous students in the workshops. Students had difficulty writing personal learning goals and relating them to the graduate attributes made the task easier – examples from previous students are now included in the workshops, although in the first year I worked with students on how to write their goals. Since their goals relate to graduate attributes it also became easier to show the students how they could then incorporate them into their CVs and letters of application once they graduated.

## METHODOLOGY & IMPLEMENTATION

### **PREPARATION FOR PLACEMENT**

The assessments for the placement course are methods of supporting the students as they prepare for their placement, reflecting on the work they do during their placement, and assessing the skills acquired on the conclusion of their placement. The initial report is written before the student commences their placement and enables them to find out about the organisation and write some personal learning goals which are explicitly linked to the university graduate attributes (University of Glasgow, 2023a).

### **WORK-BASED JOURNAL ASSESSMENT**

Many organisations now use working journals in which employees record work done during the day in online accessible forms and the benefits of this sharing of information has been published (Nguyen and Malik, 2020). The work-based journal assessment is therefore an example of an authentic assessment in which students record their daily work and which improves their employability (Sokhanvar, Salehi and Sokhanvar, 2021). In addition, they include a summary each week in which they reflect on the week's work and the progress they are making with their personal learning goals; they also record any skills acquired e.g., use of equipment and software, which can then be included in their CV.

### **THEMATIC PROJECT DISSERTATION**

The final assessment is a dissertation based on themes in which they can consider the 'past and present' of the organisation or the project, the 'future and sustainability' of the organisation or project, any ethical concerns, a comparison of routine and creativity in the workplace and finally, any similarities or differences between theory learned at university and the reality of the work in the workplace.



## STUDENT SUPPORT

We have a workshop on the placement course which looks specifically at these assessments for the course (Initial report – which includes these personal learning goals); work-based journal (which includes achievement of the goals on a weekly basis); dissertation (based on themes which can include the personal learning goals if relevant to the theme content). During the workshop for the initial report, we cover the personal learning goals, examine the university's graduate attributes matrices, look at examples from previous years - the students then have an opportunity to write some of their own goals. As these are personal to the student they are not shared with the class.

## SECURING AND ASSESSING PLACEMENTS

Securing a placement is a key challenge the students face as they take the lead in contacting potential placement providers. Students are provided with text, as students can be unclear about the differences between formal and informal writing (Purcell, Buchanan and Friedrich, 2013) which they can amend to suit their own interests and experiences when contacting a potential organisation. Very occasionally organisations will be in touch with the academic to ask for a student – these tend to be organisations who have had students before – and the opportunity will be advertised on the Moodle site for the course. Most placements are however organised by the students as their interests vary from year to year. Once the student believes that a placement is likely to be offered, the organisation is put in touch with the university to complete risk assessments, health and safety, and the insurance questionnaire. Once everything is completed to both organisations' satisfaction, the placement is confirmed. During the placement the organisation is contacted twice, once halfway through for a one-page report on how the student is performing, and once at the end for a final evaluation of the student's performance – both are shared with the student. Students have been placed world-wide, from the WWT Caerlaverock to the Australian Koala Foundation (University of Glasgow, 2023b).



## ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION

### **TIMING OF THE WORKSHOPS**

The workshops before the placement used to be offered in the first two weeks of semester 2 before the students went out on placement in week 3. The feedback from the students was that these workshops were too late, and they wanted them much earlier. So, these workshops are now offered in semester 1 in week 3. This works much better according to the student evaluations of the course, as they have the information they require for their placements, 4 months in advance of them starting the placement.

The alignment of personal learning goals with the university's graduate attribute matrix commenced in academic year 2018/19 during the first workshop. This was, and is, therefore an opportunity to familiarise all students with the graduate attributes matrix and how it can be linked to personal learning goals and the ways in which they can emphasise their acquired skills on their CVs and letters of application.

### **STUDENT AND EMPLOYER FEEDBACK**

From the CVs I have seen from students who have undertaken placements, there does seem to be evidence of better expression of graduate attributes the students can offer an employer. Certainly, every year a small number of the students have been offered voluntary work by the placement organisation, with about two students every three years being offered full-time, paid employment. At the end of the placement the students have the opportunity in their dissertation workshop, and the end of course evaluation, to feedback on their experience with the organisation. Many mention the improvement in their confidence and self-esteem, and the opportunity to enhance their CV; others mentioned that they learnt that they had the ability to motivate people or could relate the work done at university to the world of work more easily. Most importantly, students realised that they could make a contribution to the workplace and valued the opportunity to 'try out a career'.

From the employer perspective, the number asking for a student the following year or ticking the box on the feedback sheet stating that they would be happy to have another student, is testament to their satisfaction with our students' work.

The inclusion of the placement option is undoubtedly a key selling point of our degree, and many students state it as the reason they applied. This was particularly apparent during lockdown when all placements were cancelled for safety reasons – many students cited the placement as the reason they wanted to do the degree and were naturally disappointed that Covid took this away from them.



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## REFLECTIONS & CONCLUSIONS

The Scottish undergraduate degree is unique in the UK in that it is generally a 4-year programme rather than the traditional 3-year programme. Couple this with Scotland's retention of the centralised funding system and its willingness to integrate systems to create and utilise skills (Keep, 2014) and you have the potential to offer graduates with the skills necessary for the workplace. Our degrees facilitate the inclusion of a semester for a work-related opportunity in the form of a credit-bearing placement course. This prospect can enable a student to gain experience within a sector they hope to enter and equip them with the graduate attributes to articulate this to future employers.

While a placement course may not be an option for some programmes, we have ensured that our course is as scalable and transferable as possible, by providing template emails for the students to contact their own employers and supporting them to find their own placements, and by incorporating the standard dissertation into the summative assessment-for this course. Another aspect of our courses which is extremely transferable to other courses is the linking of aims, intended learning outcomes and formative and summative assessments to the University's standard graduate attributes framework.

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