

1. Establishing a professional placement for social research students

1.1 Aims and Background

The MSc Social Research has existed for a number of years, and provided the Faculty with recognition for ESRC funded studentships. It was singled out for praise by ESRC and by internal quality processes for the quantitative methods teaching especially. Indeed the success of the bid for ESRC Regional Training Centre was in part due to this quality provision. The programme provides a thorough grounding in social research methods and it supports a wide range of PhD training requirements.

The MSc Social Research aims to raise student awareness of research findings and the impact of key research areas upon particular social science discipline areas by a variety of means. The proposed project is primarily concerned with 'knowledge transfer'.

The aim was to develop a 20 credit professional placement 'option' module which would consist of a short period of placement activity at approved institutions. These institutions were selected on the basis of the quality and variety of research they undertake. Students have the opportunity to experience major survey work at first hand, and gain vital skills in designing, administering and analysing social research. In addition, there are vital skills professional researchers need to acquire which do not currently fall into the scope of the MSc Social Research. For example, students' experience of secondary data analysis is very limited.

The experience of spending a short time in a professional research environment equips students with vital professional experience and knowledge to take forward with them in their future careers. Working with professionals in high profile, nationally based institutions would improve the employability of the graduates of this programme.

It is also possible to allow students who work in an organisation that has a research function within it, to spend the 'option' time in their own workplace carrying out work related to the business of their employer. Furthermore, it is possible to 'accredit' students with this module if they submit work showing that they have carried out work which fulfils the learning outcomes of the module.

1.2 Methodology

Following visits and discussions with appropriate personnel in SERIO, Cornwall County Council and the Office for National Statistics, a 20 credit module was developed and approved to run from September 2007 as an 'option'. No students chose this module in the first year of operation. In 2008/9 one student chose it. SERIO was the placement provider and the student carried out the work in negotiation with SERIO and his workplace.

1.3 The Module

The module (MSR519 Professional Placement Option) has the following aims:

‘This module enables students to apply and develop their understanding of social research through its application to the experience they gain from a short professional placement.’

The learning outcomes of the module were:

At the end of the module the learner will be expected to be able to:

Demonstrate a clear understanding of one of the following stages of the social research process:

1. Planning research, identifying project aims & scope liaising with clients.
2. Designing research instruments.
3. Operationalising research, collecting data, or conducting interviews surveys etc
4. Data analysis, interpretation and reporting.

Demonstrate an ability to communicate research findings in an appropriate way.

1.4 Numbers of students involved

All students (except those who were ESRC funded PhD students) on the MSc Social Research were offered the opportunity to take this module. This accounts for 22 students to date. The module will continue to be offered and is a fully integrated part of the programme.

1.5 Other Benefits

In addition to this development on the MSc Social Research, when new programmes associated to the MSc Social Research were developed these ideas were embedded in to them. Thus the MSc Social Research and Evaluation offers a placement option (MSR530).

2. MSc Social Research: Work based learning project

This proposal builds upon the experience gained in developing the placement module. It is anticipated that the institutions involved in that separate development would also be involved in providing a more extensive period of work based learning for students.

2.1 Aims

To develop a work based learning alternative to the standard dissertation model.

There are two ways in which this could operate:

i) a student working within the organisation in which they are employed to carry out an approved project.

ii) a placement could be arranged in an approved institution. This placement would consist of a three month period during which time the student would carry out an agreed programme of work and produce a portfolio of work for assessment. These organisations would be mainly, but not exclusively, identified from the partners involved in the 20 credit professional placement.

This model would appeal to employers such as local government, health authority, voluntary sector and criminal justice organisations. Placements

could also be offered in The Local Government Elections Centre, SERIO and those involved in the placement module.

Since the programme also has the benefit of Market Research Accreditation, a placement could be arranged in a market research or marketing organisation.

Funding provided support for students and placement/workbased learning providers in the first year of this module. This enabled the Social Research programme team to establish clear procedures and guidelines and work with partners to develop the work based learning element.

2.2 Methodology

Partners involved in the associated project detailed in section one were involved in developing a longer placement which replaced the dissertation phase of the programme. It was important that a number of principles were adhered to in developing this module:

- i) The module should fulfil the same or equivalent learning outcomes as the dissertation
- ii) The student should be able to work as part of a team and submit work as such
- iii) The work need not be one single project, but could comprise contribution to a number of projects
- iv) The timing of the module be flexible
- v) It is possible to accredit work already carried out, which fulfils the learning outcomes
- vi) The module could make it easier for students combining work and study
- vii) The module could benefit the community and/or contribute to the enterprise agenda

A module was approved to run from September 2007 MSR520 Professional Placement. In 2007/8 two students took this module, one was placed with SERIO and the other with Cornwall County Council. Both successfully passed the module, one with a distinction. It is likely that the work she carried out for the Council will be developed into a larger project in due course. In 2008/9 one student undertook the placement module with SERIO. At the time of writing this is ongoing and has not yet been completed.

2.3 Numbers of Students Involved

All students (except those who were ESRC funded PhD students) on the MSc Social Research were offered the opportunity to take this module. This accounts for 22 students to date. The module will continue to be offered and is a fully integrated part of the programme.

3. Evaluation

3.1 Best Practice Guide

A report was prepared by the research assistant responsible for supporting students on placement, Dr Susan Child (Appendix One). In this report recommendations were made about the running of the module, which were acted upon for 2008/9. Thus a much more detailed module guide was issued for both MSR519 and MSR520 and the information about these modules was available at induction.

3.2 Evaluation of Placements in School of Law and Social Science

These projects instigated a much wider review of placements and work based learning within the School of Law and Social Science. The aim was to evaluate the experiences of students undertaking work based learning in order to understand some of the issues associated with work based learning and establish some best practice guidelines. We also wanted to identify generic and programme specific issues in order to tailor work based learning to specific student groups. (Appendix Two).

There were a number of issues identified:

- i) students wanted to develop research and communication skills as well as improve employability.
- ii) students did prepare for WBL, in terms of reading and researching things like dress codes.
- iii) most students looked forward to the placement.
- iv) students worried about getting their choice of placement.
- v) students worried about being 'liked' while on placement.
- vi) students worried about not having enough experience.
- vii) most students positively evaluated their placements and should high levels of satisfaction.
- viii) students wanted more information about expectations from employers, in terms of behaviour, dress, and specific work roles.

Although the evaluation was not targeted at masters students it was felt that a number of generic issues would be uncovered and we could usefully learn from the experiences of placement students generally. These comments will be acted upon as we review the modules and work to improve the student experience.

4. Continuation

Both projects have resulted in modules being developed and fully integrated into the MSc Social Research. They have also resulted in modules being approved for other, associated programmes. In addition, the project has enabled the School to look more widely at work based learning and share some experiences across other programmes.

Appendix One

Best Practice Guide Work Based Learning – Dr Susan
Child

Best Practice Guide for Student Placements on Module MSR 520

Faculty of Social
Science and Business.
The University of
Plymouth.

Dr Sue Child.
September 2008.

Contents

Introduction	page 3
Module Aims	page 3
Module Objectives and Learning Outcomes	page 4
Indicative Syllabus	pages 4 & 5
Assessment Criteria	page 5
Expectations of Students	page 6
Academic Dishonesty	page 6
Recommendations for Best Practice	page 7
..... <i>Choice of Module</i>	page 8
..... <i>Programme of Work</i>	page 9
..... <i>Hours of Work</i>	page 10
..... <i>Placement Insurance</i>	page 11
..... <i>Choice of Placement</i>	page 11
..... <i>Allocation of Supervisors</i>	page 12
..... <i>Integration with MSc Social Research</i>	page 13
..... <i>Expenses</i>	page 14
..... <i>Monitoring of Student Destinations</i>	page 14

Introduction

Module MSR520 Professional Project Placement is an optional module within the MSc Social Research degree offered in the Faculty of Social Science and Business at the University of Plymouth. It is a professional placement module, which students may opt to take instead of writing a traditional masters dissertation. The aim of the module is to place students in an applied research environment where they are expected to undertake independent / group research and produce a project portfolio evidencing the research they have been involved in. It is expected that students will spend at least 108 hours in an appropriate work / placement environment. Each student is assigned a supervisor from the University and a mentor in the workplace.

Regular supervisory sessions take place either in the workplace, University or another convenient location. Placement programmes are considered to provide students with an introduction to the work environment and offer valuable learning experience. Module MSR520 was first offered as an option module in the 2007-08 academic year.

Module Aims

The aim of the module is to enable students to apply and develop their understanding of social research through the experience gained from a professional placement.

Module Objectives and Learning Outcomes

At the end of the module, students are expected to have:

- Demonstrated a clear understanding of each stage of the research process.
- Operationalised an appropriate research question within a work based setting.
- Used appropriate data gathering techniques.
- Demonstrated their ability to report effectively and clearly in a manner appropriate to their placement setting.
- Demonstrated an awareness of the strengths and limitations of methodological approaches used.
- Demonstrated an awareness of the ethical issues involved with the research undertaken.

Indicative Syllabus

Whilst it is difficult to define an actual syllabus for this module due to the varying nature of potential research to be undertaken, it is expected that students will cover the following aspects of the research process in their placements:

- Planning Research – *identifying the scope and aims of the project and liaising with clients.*

- Designing Research Instruments.
- Operationalising Research – *collecting data, or conducting interviews / surveys etc.*
- Data analysis including interpretation and reporting.

It is also expected that students will apply theoretical knowledge gained on other MSc modules to the practical application in an applied setting.

Assessment Criteria

The module is examined by 100% coursework. Students who opt for this module are expected to produce a short project report summarising evidence of involvement in the four stages of research detailed above. They are also expected to keep a **research diary** where they record the activities in which they are involved and are encouraged to reflect on how their research practice has been informed by theory and principles taught on the MSc programme. This diary is expected to guide discussions between student and supervisor in a programme of regular supervisory sessions throughout the placement period. Students are also expected to produce a **research portfolio (12,000 to 15,000 words)**. This should consist of a series of reports on the different stages of the research that has been undertaken whilst on placement. The reports are expected to contain a detailed description and critical analysis of all the research undertaken in the research setting. The student is also encouraged to include any other data analysis, evaluation reports, literature reviews etc. written during the placement even if their contribution to them is only a part. The student should indicate clearly in the body of the portfolio exactly what their contribution has been in the case of group or team work.

The module offers no formal lectures to supplement or guide the placement process. Before allocating a placement, students are required to prepare a brief CV and letter of application stating their interests, any timing or location constraints or research preferences such as a team setting or a focus on a particular type of research methodology. It must be stated that placement cannot be guaranteed.

Expectations of Student

Because the students are representing the University of Plymouth whilst on professional placement, it is expected that they conduct themselves according to the University of Plymouth code of conduct. Any confidential information disclosed to the student whilst on placement must remain so and the student must not pass on any information to a third party without express permission of the placement provider. The research undertaken whilst on placement must comply with standard ethical guidelines with regard to the health and safety of the student. The placement provider has a duty to care for the student whilst they are undertaking research on their behalf. It is not expected that students are paid a salary whilst on placement. However, it is expected that any out of pocket expenses incurred by the student whilst carrying out fieldwork on behalf of the provider must be met by the provider.

Academic Dishonesty

Despite the fact this is a practical placement module, it is still expected that a computer output or written report containing data analysis should be the students own work unless declared otherwise. Students therefore remain bound by the University of Plymouth guidelines for written work and the strict regulations pertaining to academic dishonesty.

Recommendations for Best Practice

The following recommendations for best practice are based on answers given by students who chose MSR 520 as an option module during the 2007-08 academic year as well as their line-managers in the applied research environment. Whilst the recommendations are based on a small sample size, they do suggest a certain degree of commonality in thoughts and suggestions about several modular expectations. They are not presented in any formal order, but try to follow the module descriptor/ aims and learning outcomes detailed above. Each key point is discussed and is followed by bullet point suggestions for change. As more students complete the module over the next few years, then further evaluation of the aims and outcomes will clearly be necessary to amend best practice over time. There may also be the opportunity to undertake further research in order to identify the modules scope and longevity in relation to possible early career benefits of participants.

Recommendations:

1. **Choice of Module:** It is suggested that more information about the exact nature of the module be made available during the MSc induction programme. This may entail previous supervisors and students outlining the key aims and expectations of the module. As the number of completed placements increases, potential students would welcome the opportunity to examine completed portfolios and diaries in order to get 'more of a feel' for what is involved. It is also suggested that the module descriptor be made clearer in terms of portfolio guidelines and expected structure.

More detailed information at induction.

More detailed module descriptor.

2. **Programme of work:** All respondents (both students and placement providers) suggested that the expectations of the research be made much clearer at the outset. A quasi-contract of work / employment may be useful. This would detail the start and finish dates for the placement period, expected office hours and duties and define a structured programme of work that would be agreed between the student, his or her supervisor and the placement provider before the placement commenced. The contract would allow placement providers to make advance plans to allocate specific fieldwork duties to students and ensure they have a viable place on any team based projects. A contract would also enable students to ensure they meet the module objectives and learning outcomes.

Quasi-contract of employment.

3. **Hours:** As defined in the module handbook, it is expected that students will spend at least 108 hours in their placement setting. However, this figure appears to have caused confusion. The 108 hours is a *minimum* requirement and it is widely expected that students will need to spend more than this in order to gain a worthwhile understanding of applied social research. This figure only equates to three weeks work (assuming a working day of 7 hours). There is a need to define hours at the outset and these are clearly dependent on the nature and scope of research to be undertaken. Hours can be specified in the suggested quasi contract of work as discussed on the previous page. By agreeing working hours at the outset, students will be able to flag any timing and location constraints before fieldwork is agreed. It would also allow placement providers with the opportunity to sign timesheets which would be

provided before students started their placement. Completed and signed timesheets could then be used in portfolio evidence.

Research hours to be agreed at the outset.

Timesheets.

- 4.
5. **Placement Insurance:** There appears to be a need to confirm the extent to which students are personally insured against industrial accident or injury whilst on placement. Does this insurance come from the University of Plymouth, or the providers own employers liability insurance?

Confirmation of employer's liability insurance.

6. **Choice of Placement:** There would appear to be a need to offer a choice of placement providers offering different research options. One student had expressed a desire to work in a team environment but the placement provider did not offer this as an option.

More choice of placement.

7. **Allocation of Supervisors:** The allocation and role of supervisors needs to be defined. Students were confused by the multiple numbers of supervisors allocated to them. Two alternatives were suggested. One student would prefer just one supervisor who would be responsible for finding a suitable placement and supervising both fieldwork and the academic portfolio. This would maintain continuity of advice. Another suggestion was to have one supervisor who took responsibility for placement and another who would be chosen as an

expert in the subject being researched, who would supervise the portfolio. This appeared to be broadly in line with traditional MSc dissertations where student choice of research was matched as far as possible to academic specialisms.

Decide how supervisors are to be allocated.

Will students have a choice?

8. Better integration of MSR520 with MSc Social Research Programme:

It was suggested that the MSR520 module does not fit comfortably with the MSc Social Research degree. An early decision should be made about whether a student will be writing the traditional MSc dissertation, or opting to follow MSR520. If MSR520 is chosen, then timescales for completion of certain core modules of assessed work for the overall degree should be shifted in order to accommodate the different research routes. For example, as a requirement of the MSc degree, students are expected to submit a fully referenced bibliography in..... as evidence they are beginning to read around the research field they have chosen. However, placement students may not yet have started their fieldwork and in some cases the literature review for the MSc degree became simply an exercise to pass the required assessment and did not support fieldwork at a later date. Again, an early agreement as to the scope and nature of placement fieldwork could assist here. If a student knew as soon as possible the type of research he or she will be later involved with, a detailed and relevant literature review and bibliography could be submitted for the MSc assessment.

Move some MSc deadlines to accommodate students choosing MSR520.

9. **Expenses:** As discussed in point 5 (on page 11), students would appear to welcome more choice of placement. However, this raises the issue of travel costs. Again, this would need to be discussed at the outset and before any placement decision is made. With the geographical diversity of MSc students, it would appear necessary to offer potential placements across the South West region. Not only would this increase choice with regard to type of research on offer, it would give students who travel some distance to University the opportunity to research closer to home. However, increased choice may have the opposite effect and students may opt for a placement some distance from either their home or from the University. In this case, it needs to be defined at the outset whether or not assistance with travel expenses will be offered. Clearly, this may not be such a concern to 1+3 studentship holders.

Define if travel expenses for placement will be paid.

10. **Monitoring of Placement Outcomes:** It was suggested that part of the module descriptor should include statistical information about the first destinations and retention in academia (either paid research appointments or progression into doctoral study) of students opting for this module.

Appendix Two

Evaluation of Work Based Learning School of Law and Social Science

Evaluation of work Based Learning Modules – CCJS3110 & SOC2504

The SOC2504 module is run in the second year and the CCJS3110 module is run in the third year. The module enables students to gain valuable experience in the work place. For the current academic year there were 20 students enrolled on the CCJ module and 8 on the SOC module. A preliminary questionnaire was sent by e-mail to all of the students enrolled prior to them completing their placements. This was followed up by an evaluation form given to the students in person. There was a 60% response rate to the e-mail questionnaire from the CCJ students and a 50% response rate from the SOC students. Unfortunately, there has been no response at all from the SOC students regarding the evaluation forms, there was a 65% response rate from the CCJ students.

In terms of the preliminary responses there was parity between the two groups of students regarding their expectations and reasons to be doing a work based learning module. Although the majority of SOC students were hoping to develop their research skills (75%), both groups of students were also hoping to develop communication skills on their placements, 75% of CCJ and 50% of SOC students mentioned this and one of the other skills they hoped to develop was team work 42% (CCJ), 25% (SOC).

The overall majority of SOC students were hoping that their WBL would help in terms of their career prospects, 75% of them mentioned this. The CCJ students on the other hand mentioned a broader range of issues that might help in terms of career development, 34% of them did mention career development specifically, but there was also interest in knowledge and experience itself (25%), getting a foot in the door (16%) as well as communication and team work skills again (25%).

The majority of SOC students had done preparatory reading (75%), whilst 58% of the CCJ students mentioned this. The CCJ students though had also spoken to relevant people (42%) and found out about the dress code (25%). Both groups of students were looking forward to the placement 100% of the

SOC students and 83% of the CCJ students, Experience of the profession was what the SOC students were looking forward to, the CCJ students had a more varied response, incorporating issues to do with meeting people, working in a team and developing new skills.

The last question asked the students to reflect upon any worries or anxieties they might have about their placement. For the SOC students some were concerned that they wouldn't get their first choice of placement (25%) and others that they wouldn't be liked whilst on placement (25%). Half of them didn't have any worries or anxieties. Some of the CCJ students were similarly not worried (34%), although a similar number (34%) were worried about their lack of knowledge or inexperience. Some of the CCJ students also mentioned safety as an issue (16%), which may reflect the nature of some of the work based learning placements for the CCJ students, working as they might with the police, probation service, youth offending teams etc.,

The evaluation of the WBL module from the CCJ students was very positive. All of the students were very satisfied (77%) or satisfied (23%) with the pre-placement preparation, including CV writing, reflective writing, preparation lectures, the interview process and assistance with placements generally. There were a couple of comments on providing follow up lectures and guidance on the assessment. Although this may have reflected their anxiety about the poster presentation they were preparing at the time of the evaluation. In terms of them improving their own research prior to finding a placement, a couple of students mentioned doing more research themselves and one student wished she'd been a bit more specific about what she'd wanted before hand.

In terms of the overall level of support from the University and the employer, all of the students expressed satisfaction with the level of support. 62% were very satisfied and 38% were satisfied. In terms of how the University might improve the support it offered, there was a comment on advice about expectations in terms of the assessment and what to wear, also more precise

information on what the students would be doing and how to deal with difficult people. The majority of comments were positive.

When commenting on employer support, there was a comment on the need for more information on what the student would be doing whilst on placement. There was also one negative comment about the student not feeling involved and the staff not knowing who they were and why they were there. Another comment was that departments were unaware of the impending placement and that the employer was never available to talk to. Also, one student felt that they could have been e-mailed more regularly. There were also a similar number of positive comments regarding the employers support, such as well supported, doesn't need improving, don't think it could (be improved) and it was very well done.

In order for the students to have gained more from their placements they commented that they might have liked a longer placement, someone mentioned a year, or they could have spent time with more than one agency or in certain areas that may have been off limits to them as students. Other than these comments they could have kept more notes or done more research on the agencies they were involved with.

The penultimate question on the evaluation form asked the students to consider their placement in terms of its relevance to their intended career, Again this was positively evaluated, 62% were very satisfied, 23% were satisfied, 8% were not satisfied and 8% didn't complete this part of the form. The useful aspects of the placement involved visiting a variety of departments, finding out core tasks, seeing the real world of work, finding out about career options, engaging with different kinds of people and learning how the agencies worked together. There were only two negative comments about the relevance of the placement and these were; working at the front desk at Charles Cross and working with older people. The last aspect of this question asked the students to consider what else might have been included in their placement. In answer to this, those that replied focussed upon areas such as night time patrol, night shifts, crown court attendance, time in custody

and visiting departments such as the child protection unit. These were potentially areas that were perhaps off limits to students due to health and safety issues.

The students were asked finally to add any other comments. These were all positive. They enjoyed the placement, it was informative and helpful. The placement helped them to make important informed decisions about their careers. One student said that the placement was more than they'd hoped for – it was brilliant. Overall the positive comments far outweighed any of the negative experiences. It would also appear that the module was extremely beneficial in terms of helping the students to make decisions about their careers. Whether this would have been the same for the SOC students is obviously difficult to measure.