Student Work Placements as a Focus for Building Partnerships Between Universities and Sustainable Development Stakeholders

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Abstract

The Department of Geography at Northumbria University has run a successful (and expanding) work placement module for a number of years now, which seeks to work with external partners and stakeholders to enhance employability of prospective graduates, and to contribute to the capacity of the partner organisations in terms of selected mini-projects. These are flexible in set up and execution, but with a required report output for the placement host, as well as a reflective portfolio for assessment of the students. A significant strand has been on sustainability projects, including green travel surveys, biodiversity mapping, marketing, and feasibility project research, working for instance with business parks, social enterprises and logistics companies. This paper reviews the key methods of engagement with these partner organisations, and the way that students are selected, placed, coached and assessed. It identifies some of the challenges and risks involved in the process, and critically explores how even small exploratory and applied projects can make a difference regarding engagement by a university department with external stakeholders at city/regional (and beyond) and societal level, and effectively foster

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understanding through a reflective process of student learning and assessment of the nature of environmental, social and economic challenges in promoting more sustainable practices in cities and societies.

Keywords

Higher education · Employability · Sustainable development · Work placements · Partnership · Reflective learning

1 Introduction

This paper seeks to review the key methods of engagement by Northumbria University's Geography department with our partner organisations in the context of a work placement module, including the way that students are selected, placed, coached and assessed. The paper reflects on the challenges and risks involved in the process, and critically explores how even small exploratory and applied projects can make a difference regarding engagement by a university department with external stakeholders at city/regional (and beyond) and societal level. We conclude that the module and this mode of engagement with our partners effectively fosters understanding of sustainability and workplace environments through a reflective process of student learning and assessment of the nature of environmental, social and economic challenges in promoting more sustainable practices in cities and societies.

Equipping undergraduate students with the skills and knowledge to find a graduate-level job upon completing their degree, as well as then establishing themselves on a career journey, is a key underlying goal for universities. However, this goal is not always fully realised:

> More than half of major employers [in the UK] say that the graduates they hire are not 'work ready' on leaving university. Communication skills, teamwork, resilience and punctuality are among the attributes employers want
>
>   (Research conducted by YouGov with 635 UK employers) The Times, 2013

The UK's Leitch Review (2006) on future skills needed for employment and competitiveness needed for "UK plc" underlined the importance of offering opportunities in higher education for students to develop 'job related skills'.

> We cannot call to mind any psychological text that commends one-off skills development units and recall that many say that 'skills' are best developed by being applied to a range of worthwhile material. Skillful practices are best developed across a whole programme in order to provide practice, reinforcement and opportunities to apply those practices to different content through increasingly authentic tasks.
>
>   Knight and Yorke 2004: 43

'Employability' is a contested term used in a range of contexts (Hillage and Pollard 1998). Supporting this notion, Philpott (1999) describes employability as a 'buzzword' which is often used but which is interpreted in a number of different ways, and Gazier (in McQuaid and Lindsay 2005: p. 197) states employability is *'a fuzzy notion, often ill-defined and sometimes not defined at all'.*

Yorke and Knight (2006: 3) define employability as:

> A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes - that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.

Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) suggest that the commonly held view of employability as being about securing a job or merely developing a number of individual skills is rather simplistic, and falls short of the real dimension (including in terms of career trajectory and lifelong learning).

> …employability goes well beyond the simplistic notion of key skills, and is evidenced in the application of a mix of personal qualities and beliefs, understandings, skillful practices and the ability to reflect productively on experience.
>
> Higher Education Academy Online (n.d.)

A number of models have been developed to attempt to describe and explain the complex range of factors that may influence employability (see e.g. Knight and Yorke 2004; Kumar 2007; Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007); these include commonly understood variables such as knowledge, understanding and skills, as well as variously emphasising less tangible qualities such as meta-cognition and self-theories (Knight and Yorke 2004). Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) place high value on emotional intelligence factors such as self-esteem, confidence and self-efficacy, suggesting that reflection and evaluation of one's performance may be key to developing such attributes. The Northumbria University's Geography work placement module builds on this theme by encouraging students to evaluate and reflect on their own performance on placement.

2 The Work Placement Module at Northumbria University

The Geography and Environment work placement module aims to provide final year degree students with the opportunity to review, evaluate and build upon the skills and knowledge that they have attained during the programme by applying them in a workplace environment. The module also introduces students to a range of career development and management skills, encourages them to begin applying these, and enhances their job seeking preparedness. By the end of the module students should be able to meet, and are assessed against, the following learning outcomes:

- Reflect on their subject-specific and graduate knowledge base and demonstrate a critical awareness of the practical relevance and provisional nature of this knowledge;

- Critically evaluate their current skills and knowledge and map these to the skills and knowledge required within future careers in their subject area;
- Apply their subject-specific and graduate skills to the world of work and make clear linkages between theoretical, professional and practical application of such skills in the work context;
- Develop and apply their practical subject-specific skills to the range of contexts which apply within the work/organisational/industry situation;
- Demonstrate their autonomy but also team working skills in applying subject skills within the work place;
- Self-evaluate their transferable career skills, including: teamwork; initiative-taking/leadership; communication; analytical skills and problem-solving; independent working; and having a professional and responsible approach to work.

The module is an increasingly popular year long optional unit of the undergraduate degree programmes in Geography and Environmental Management, and is split into two main parts: semester one involves a taught programme focusing on employability and career skills, and incorporates the process of allocating or finding and securing placements; and in semester two students carry out their placements.

Semester one course materials are designed to encourage students to engage with the process of applying their subject-specific learning and knowledge, alongside the skills they have developed through other means, which may also be extra-curricular within the university (as course reps and in the Students Union) or gained outside through part-time jobs or volunteering. This includes the higher order transferable skills that are valued by employers. At every step, students are given time to reflect and to enable them to build a bank of personal examples to draw upon during the typical application process. They are encouraged to reflect on their own values, strengths, skills, preferences and achievements as a key part of the career development process.

The taught programme begins by introducing students to the range of career choices a degree in Geography or Environmental Management may lead them to. They are encouraged to think about their own aspirations and preferences, and are provided with information that may help them to make career decisions, such as destinations of past graduates (including by an annual departmental Careers Day with both employers and Alumni presenting), the nature of various occupations and organisations, and what skills are highly valued by employers of differing natures and industries (private, public and third sector). They are also given the opportunity to evaluate their own skills and strengths through psychometric testing and skills identification activities. Sessions go on to consider job seeking activities and strategies, and sources of support. For instance, students are encouraged to develop a CV and to practise writing covering letters and completing application forms targeted to specific roles, as well as taking part in interview practice. Staff teaching the course have developed a range of student-centred activities to enable students to practise and gain experience in key types of activity.

> Students participate in a 'making your skills and experience count' exercise, which involves articulating and sharing their own examples. They are divided into pairs. Student 1 is given a card showing a key skill, e.g. teamwork, and asks Student 2 to provide a specific example showing their ability relating to this skill. Student 2 has two minutes in which to do this, after which Student 2 moves to a different table where he or she will be asked about a different skill.
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> Student 1 must actively listen to Student 2's response, and at the end of the exercise is asked to share the best responses they were given with the group. The exercise provides students with thinking time and the opportunity to share examples with their peers, and gives them practice in articulating responses to questions, which increases their confidence and ability to do this.

Example activity: speed dating for skills

3 Completing the Work Placement

Students on the module must undertake a short work placement lasting for at least 70 hours or 10 working days, arranged and executed in a flexible manner to suit both the host organisation and the student. This is usually—but not always—carried out during semester two, following the taught programme in semester one.

The aim of the placement is to provide a relevant, academically credible, work-based learning experience. The student is expected to show significant development in core transferable skills and therefore increase his or her chances of finding rewarding employment after graduation. Students submit a final assignment which reflects on and evaluates their placement and how it has influenced their knowledge, skills, and future career plans and aspirations. Figure 1 shows the range of skills which students must demonstrate through their placement, and which are they are assessed for (with some input from the workplace supervisor at the host organisation and the assigned academic university supervisor who oversees the placement and communicates with and visits—in person if possible or otherwise virtually—the host organisation).

Part of the taught element of the module is dedicated to helping students find placements. This is managed in one of two ways: by seeking out placement opportunities and asking students to apply (competitively if there are several suitable candidates) for them, and by encouraging students to find their own placements. Both routes involve equipping students with traditional employability skills such as CV writing and practising interview techniques, and the latter also aims to enable students to seek out opportunities; it is taught in combination with job searching activities. The rest of this section will describe the former process.

Department staff work with external organisations in a number of ways, whether this is through conducting research, organising teaching activities such as field trips and visiting lecturers, or through more strategic partnering activities. Northumbria University is committed to this style of working, with its Corporate Strategy stating

Upon successfully completing the placement, the student will:

1. Demonstrate an in-depth knowledge of what the employing (placement) organisation does.

2. Demonstrate an understanding of how the organisation is structured and managed.

3. Demonstrate an understanding of the economic, political/social and environmental context in which the organisation is set.

4. Gain theoretical knowledge applicable to their placement and demonstrate how this has been applied.

5. Gain practical skills appropriate to their placement and their degree.

6. Develop the ability to evaluate and reflect on their own learning.

7. Develop skills of communication, co-operation, self-reliance and self-expression.

8. Develop confidence in visual, oral, written and data presentation skills.

9. Develop other personal skills, as negotiated and set down in the learning agreement.

Fig. 1 Work placement learning outcomes

that '*Partnership working…creates mutual gains in reputation and sustainability*' (Northumbria University 2013). For staff working on the module, securing placements can be a key way to develop and cement relationships with partner organisations they come into contact with, but can also be a result of those collaborative relationships. The potential benefits of taking on a placement student can include having an additional resource to help with the overall work of an organisation for specific tasks or projects, and current students may also have useful skills and knowledge, or provide a new and different perspective on day to day operational issues. Figure 2 shows an excerpt from a letter routinely sent out to potential placement providers, which shows how these potential benefits are presented to employers.

Once an organisation agrees to take on a placement student, staff work with them to customise and draw up an 'advertisement'/brief. This is usually a brief description of what type of work the placement will involve, and a short list of key

'*Is there a geography or environmental issue that your company/organisation needs to address or a project that you would like to undertake, but you just don't have the staff resources or time?*

'*Perhaps a work placement student would be the answer.*

'*We have a number of final year students studying for degrees in geography and/or the environment, and are currently looking for unpaid ten day work-based placements.*

'*Placement students can be taken on to work on a specific project or to help with the general work of an organisation. Students may have useful expertise, e.g. GIS, or may be able to provide an extra pair of hands in tasks which require more manpower. Student placements should be mutually beneficial for both the host organisation and the student.*'

Fig. 2 Excerpt from a letter sent to partner organisations promoting placements

attributes that the ideal student will possess, e.g. that they will have particular skills, experience or interests, or will have completed specific modules. The advertisement is then posted on the e-learning portal for the module, and at the same time is automatically sent by email to all students on the module. Instructions for applying for the placement are also given; the usual process is to submit a tailored CV and covering letter to the module tutor by a specific date. The module tutor then collates applications and passes them on to the placement provider. Placement providers have free rein regarding their selection process, although the module tutor does offer help with this process, if needed. Organisations typically screen the applications for relevant attributes and then invite some or all of the applicants to an interview; this may be anything from a short chat to a formal and competitive interview process. This strategy for allocating students to placement opportunities aims to reflect real world practice, thus providing students with useful experience and skills relating to job seeking.

The work placement is an optional module which is open to all students in the Geography Department; this includes students of physical and human geography, environmental management, and crime science. The range of potential careers open to such students is very wide and varied, and this means there is a requirement to make links within a wide variety of industries and organisations in order to provide a suitably broad range of placement opportunities. Students taking the module have done placements in a range of work areas (see Fig. 3 for some recent examples).

Environmental surveys	Local Authority contaminated land team	Renewable energy
Marketing agency / music festival organisation – from local authority to independent company	Health and safety teams in private and public sector organisations	Ecology consultants
Hospital waste management	Social housing providers	Environmental projects
University research assistant in Geography & Environment	Property management	Public health
Local Authority planning department	Sustainable energy	Wildlife charities
Zoological gardens	Government environment agency	Recycling and waste management
Recruitment agencies	Forestry Commission	High street retailers
Heavy industry	Third (non-for profit / charitable) sector organisations	Environmental consultants
Accountants	Catering industry	Fashion industry
Logistics company	Public transport company	Wholesale & automotive industry

Fig. 3 Examples of types of placements undertaken by students

Examples of recent work placements completed by students on the module include one undertaken at an environmental education centre run by a local charity in Tyne and Wear. The student was tasked with organising an improvement to the nature site at the centre, and came up with a plan to create a new path on the site. Over the course of the ten week placement, during which the student attended one day per week, he liaised with the staff, helped write a successful funding bid, sourced the materials—some new and some recycled—and planned the project to completion. The path was completed during a volunteer action day, with the student in a project management role. Another placement involved two students working together to undertake a diversity study on a former greenfield site which now hosts a business park on the outskirts of Newcastle upon Tyne. The students carried out environmental surveys, consulted with staff working on the site and helped organise events to raise staff awareness of the need to protect, nurture and appreciate the business park's external environment, which includes a wildlife corridor, a letch, birdboxes, a dovecote, feeders and hedgehog houses. The placement culminated in the students presenting a report of their findings, which included detailed plans for creating a wildlife walk, wildflower meadow and duck pond, along with budgetary and fundraising strategies. Another one produced employee green travel plans for a business park as a team of consultants (https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/about-us/news-events/news/2013/05/students-guide-the-way-in-environmental-initiative/).

A further recent innovative initiative saw Nothumbria staff, placement students and a collaborating social enterprise (the Skill Mill Ltd) train former young offenders to protect the environment and give back to their communities (in the sense of restorative justice) by carrying out water and land management projects such as stream clearing, which helps to reduce flood risks, winning two national awards (https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/about-us/news-events/news/2014/12/make-mine-a-double-innovative-eco-project-wins-two-national-awards/).

4 Evidence of Success

The potential benefits of doing a student placement include building on one's skills and work-related experience, creating or bolstering one's employment record, developing transferable workplace skills and a 'work-ready' approach, and the opportunity to get to know people currently working in one's chosen field—who may be able to provide references, job opportunities or useful introductions. It is also worth noting that for some students it has confirmed that certain industries/occupations/types of organisations are not for them at this stage of their journey which is also useful in terms of not making a turn which is not beneficial for them at this stage in their graduate destination.

The success of the work placement module is measured in two key ways: by asking the students to evaluate the module, and by inviting placement providers to give feedback on their experience of hosting placements.

Process evaluation is conducted at the mid- and end-points of the year for each cohort of students. Students give their views on the module workload, learning and teaching, assessment, support and advice provided and overall satisfaction. Students are asked to comment on the positive aspects of the module and responses reflect the practical interactive elements with comments including:

'Helped me to gain a better understanding for job applications'

'Got me excited about being part of a working environment'

'Helped identify key skills'

'I liked how interactive it has been rather than all lectures'

Students were also asked to highlight areas for improvement with comments varying on practical arrangements for example:

'More CV work earlier on'

'Most sessions could be shorter'

Some students were keen for longer placements and more specific sector targeted information:

'Possibly complete longer placement and have this as the main assessment'

'More about specific industries'

Representatives of employers that took on placement students in 2013–2014 made a range of comments relating to the ways in which the students had assisted them. A key benefit for many was simply providing an extra pair of hands and enabling more work to be completed, as shown by the following comments:

'Having a student within our team has been very worthwhile and has helped spread some of the heavy workload out team is faced with'.

'Although extra line management and briefing needed to take place, the benefits (student) brought to our organisation outweighed the initial additional work'.

'Students allow us to complete projects that ordinarily we would not have enough capacity to do'.

Students were clearly given important tasks in some cases:

'The placement student has undertaken a review of several management plans which is a key target for our team'.

Placement providers praised the quality of work:

'Quality of work produced was to an excellent standard which has helped the sustainability team in their works'

Some were also able to provide expertise which the placement providers did not possess, or to contribute new ideas or approaches:

'(Student) offered a positive contribution during her placement, especially because of her knowledge of social networking which was all very new to us. (Student) created and launched our Twitter, Facebook and Linkedin company profile'.

'The student helped complete tasks which required a geography background and degree level education, and provided a 'fresh' approach to tackling tasks'.

Independent working was prized by placement providers:

'The skills involved in being able to develop, plan and deliver a valuable piece of work independently are tremendously beneficial for our organisation'.

Employers gained skills from the placement too:

'The placement allowed staff to have the opportunity to gain experience in supervising and mentoring a student'.

There were also some comments about the nature of the placement and how well it had worked within the respective organisations involved:

'Specific projects are best for both parties, allowing independent work alongside attending day to day site visits and meetings to get a feel for what it is like to work in this role'.

The project-based approach gave both the employer and student something to work towards'.

'The student was able to work largely independently and did not require too much officer input'.

'By planning in advance we try to give the student the opportunity to explore various applications of sustainability in the workplace both in terms of energy and waste. We took a flexible approach rather than a single project. This approach is to give the student an appreciation of all aspects of our sustainability work'.

5 Graduate Destinations

The module aims to equip students with the skills and knowledge to support the transition from University to employment. The UK's Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) database (which is somewhat limited in that it captures destination in terms of post-graduate work or further study only after 6 months, and as such is no measure of delayed success, a gap for whatever reason or indeed career mid-term velocity) is used as a measure of the employment status of students approximately six months after graduation. Although the data is gathered by the University, the survey and methodology is laid down by the Higher Education Statistics Agency.

In 2013/14 93.7 % of Geography and Environment graduates from Northumbria were in employment or further study six months after graduation. Unemployed levels have fallen by 1.9 % points from the previous year to 5.3 %, graduates into

professional employment has increased by 2.7 % points to 54.2 %, graduates entering graduate level further study has increased by 1.7 % points to 12.1 % and average graduate salary is £19,139, up 11.1 % on last year. Geography graduates are employed in a wide range of sectors, including the public sector, education, commerce, industry, transport and tourism. Examples of job roles that graduates have moved into included a range of management roles, GIS analysis, property consultant, resource planner and Housing Assistant.

Anecdotal evidence gathered by module teaching staff suggests that for some students, taking part in a work placement can be instrumental in helping them gain employment after graduation. This was the case for at least four students who did the module in 2013/14, and at the latest count, three students in the following cohort of 2014/5 have been offered jobs by their placement providers. In other cases, students have been offered the chance to apply for jobs when vacancies have arisen, or have been informed that their details will be kept on file in case this happens. Students have also been asked to extend their unpaid placement in other cases; while this is not as good as getting a job, it can mean that students are able to consolidate and extend their learning, add to their CV and, arguably, ensure they are in the 'right place' if any paid job vacancies do arise.

The placements can also enable employers to gain a favourable impression of the quality of Northumbria Geography & Environment graduates, while making students aware of their organisational activities at the same time. For example, an environmental management company based in the North East took on placement students for several years running. When a vacancy in the company became available, a recent graduate from the Geography Department—who had not been on placement there—applied for it and was successful in getting the job. A representative from the company said their confidence in making the appointment partly arose from their knowledge of the quality of Northumbria's Geography & Environment graduates.

6 Challenges

Sustainability is a key issue for the work placement module, as it in a concrete, applied and reflective way addresses the challenges for the Department to address the sustainability curriculum challenge in an integrated and rounded manner (Cullingford and Blewitt 2004).

Since the module was first developed several years ago student numbers have risen each year, going from around 30 students in the first intake to 105 in the most recent one. This has meant that staff workload has risen—for instance, with regard to coaching and supporting students as well as marking assignments and debriefing students as well as partner organisations—and crucially, more and more placement opportunities must be found. This can be a very time-consuming process for staff, particularly at the early stages when employers may be uncertain of the potential benefits of having a placement student, and what it might entail, meaning that staff can spend hours discussing potential placement ideas.

As a result of increasing numbers of students, increasing emphasis has been placed on encouraging students to find their own placements, and equipping them with the skills to do so. While this can be an excellent way to ensure students act on their initiative and take responsibility for making their placement a success, it can mean that the link between the employer and the University is less well developed (which may have some implications for the formal risk assessment and insurance due processes to be explained and compliance to be established).

Once an individual employer/host has decided to take part in the placements programme, this can lead to a lasting mutual arrangement during which several students are placed with them over a period of years. This can be mutually beneficial, providing the employer with a steady stream of useful (wo)manpower at busy times, while enabling the department/university to place students, allowing a two-way communication and the potential to develop additional partnership work. However, contacts with organisations may be precarious. If a specific member of staff leaves the organisation or goes off sick, then the link may be threatened or lost. This can happen at crucial times: one student was accepted onto a placement, only for the member of staff arranging it to fall ill and take time off work, leaving the student with no point of contact.

Although organisations can benefit significantly from taking on a placement student in terms of overall productivity, it can be challenging for key staff to find the time to plan the placement and provide the student with adequate supervision and mentoring. As one recent placement provider commented, '*It takes up quite a lot of time and energy*'. Many organisations that have provided placements in the past have suffered resource and staffing cuts in recent years in the context of recession and then ongoing austerity, especially in the public but also the third sector—with local authorities in the North East of England being a good example of this—and the remaining staff may find themselves too stretched by their existing role to consider adding to their workload even nominally by hosting a placement.

One employer made an important point linked to this, regarding the range of tasks placement students may be asked to take on, and how vital they are: '*Preparing projects for students to carry out takes time and although the projects are important they are not normally a priority*'. This may not necessarily be an indicator that the students cannot be trusted with heavy responsibility, but that, presumably, if the tasks in question were absolutely necessary, then the organisation would have paid a member of staff (or long established trained volunteer(s)) to do them.

The time-limited nature of the module can place pressure on students and staff. The taught programme takes place between late September and December. Students are taught some of the skills they need to find a placement—such as writing CVs and covering letters, and interview skills—during this time. At the same time, staff liaise with organisations in order to provide placement opportunities for students to apply to. This process starts in mid to late October, and goes on until all students are placed. Students are ideally expected to find a placement and be ready to begin it by January, when semester two starts and one day per week is timetabled for students to go out on placement. Alternatively, they can arrange to carry out a two week block placement in the Christmas or Easter holidays. In practice it can take some

students longer than this to find a placement, particularly for, on the one hand, students who have high expectations and are holding out for the 'perfect placement', or on the other, those who do not engage fully with the placement applications process. Students have the additional pressure during semester two of completing and submitting their final year undergraduate dissertation, at the same time as completing their placement. There is also little leeway for placement to overrun because this is the students' final year, and any delays in submitting work may jeopardise their chance of graduating with their class/cohort.

The timing of the placement can also limit the type of work students can do. With many students interested in taking part in ecological survey work, a representative of one such organisation commented: '*I think the timing of the placement can be a bit of an obstacle, as the most interesting aspects of our work occur during the summer time and the student would gain a lot more from attending at this time*'.

In some cases there may be a risk attached to sending students out on placement, especially if there are any doubts as to their behaviour or general approach to the placement. This can be a problem with students who do not initially engage with the placements process and who have to be found a placement at the last minute as a result. In such cases, placing an already reluctant student in a role they may not be very interested in can lead to negative results, with students turning up late, having an unhelpful attitude, or failing to attend for the full placement. Such behaviour from students gives a bad impression of the University, and can be even more frustrating because employers often offer such last-minute placements as a favour to staff, and such a result can potentially damage University-employer relationships.

The range of placements offered on the module is by necessity wide-ranging, because of the nature of the Department and the range of careers Geography and Environment students may enter. On an annual basis, the profile of students on the module can change markedly. For instance, in the 2013–2014 cohort, 15 students applied for a placement with a major utility provider; the following year, a similar placement in the same organisation attracted only one applicant. Differences in student interests and needs cannot always be easily matched in terms of providing new placement opportunities, as contacts with new organisations can take time to develop, and 'gaps' in provision do not always emerge until late in semester one.

Finally, while it is often desirable to provide a placement in which the student is fully responsible for their own project or activity, this does not mean that any other type of placement is not equally valuable. Depending on the organisation's needs and the interests of the individual student, other routes may be more appropriate, such as shadowing a staff member, splitting the time across different departments, or just getting stuck in and working alongside the team. The following comment illustrates this point:

> In our role it is almost impossible to take a project-based approach to the work placement. In this instance we decided to completely abandon it and just give the students as much hands-on experience as possible. This was largely due to our work. However, we also lacked the time to plan the placement adequately due to late take-up of the scheme and current organisational change.

On the odd occasion, a student has been proactive in the second year and completed a longer placement in the summer before the final year (e.g. on ERAS-MUS work placement abroad over 3 months), and then retrospectively completed the rest of this module process and assessment for credit, though this is very unusual.

The new HEAR (Higher Education Achievement Record) will make all such credits and additional activities and achievements, including volunteering facilitated through the University, transparent and evident for future employers.

7   Conclusions

There are still clearly ongoing issues to reflect on and consider.

This includes the delivery mode, where staff responsible should always look at ways to vary this (partly to suit different students' learning styles and strengths) and to provide interest. There is an ongoing need to combine activity with outcomes in changing work and industry contexts (for instance, around health and safety and public health responsibilities).

Every effort needs to be made to ensure that both employability (and lifelong learning for careers development and flexibility) and sustainability in the holistic sense make sense to students from the start of the module—and indeed the degree programme, which is why the Department is undertaking another such audit and strategic plan development currently, after previous such efforts over the past decade(s). Teaching methods likewise, in conjunction with University Careers staff and coaching at the work placement, need to be monitored and kept fresh and interactive and supportive, but also challenging and stretching.

For many students it is clear from the module evaluation and discussion with their departmental tutors—including for months afterwards and up to several years as Alumni—that they do not know what they have gained until the end of the module (and sometimes the degree programme) or even after they leave University. It is quite a common occurrence over the years that there are negative evaluations by students throughout the module (semester one, typically, before securing and going on a placement, often alongside poor attendance), but when students start applying for work it all makes sense finally, and this is reflected in part by positive module evaluations at the end of the module or well after the formal module evaluation is concluded.

There is an ongoing debate amongst staff on whether this module would be better, more effective or at least transformative in the second year of undergraduate degree study rather than their final year when they may be too busy. Also, with the current move in the University/Faculty and Department towards allowing and encouraging students to undertake year-long placements (or several placements amounting to that duration in sequence) should this module perhaps be moved to the second year of study so that year-long placements students can benefit from this (as good practice from Northumbria's Business School seems to suggest)?

A final questions concerns where the year long, and 10 day (flexible) work placements fit together, as well as (3–4 month) ERASMUS work placements, and indeed other volunteering placements facilitated through the University and a range of other agencies and companies during the year and especially in the summer months (especially between the second and third year), by the likes of Camp America or Operation Wallacea and others who frequently attract our Geography and Environment students.

It is clear that if Universities are at least in part to be financially supported by the state and by the communities/society which hosts them in various ways, including employers, they should be civically minded to develop capacity building for sustainable development in local (and national and international) communities through these partnership models, of which work placements for students where there is a net benefit for the host organisations/communities is a part (Shiel et al. 2015).

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Author Biographies

Gill Davidson B.Sc. (Hons.), M.Sc., PGDip. L&T, was until recently a Lecturer in Human Geography and prior to that a Research Associate at Northumbria University's former Sustainable Cities Research Institute. Gill has worked on a variety of research and consultancy projects in a range of subject areas, and has project managed a number of studies. Her main areas of work are evaluations, feasibility studies, consultation work, and fostering community involvement through the use of Participatory Appraisal methods. Gill was an Associate Editor of Built and Natural Environment Research Papers at Northumbria University until their discontinuation. She has published in a range of academic journals and presented at a range of academic and professional conferences.

Peter Glaves B.Sc. (Hons.), PGCE, Ph.D., is Director and External Engagement Enterprise Fellow and Principal Lecturer in Environmental Management and a chartered Ecologist and Environmental Manager. Prior to joining Northumbria University in 2010 Peter worked as a Principal Environmental Consultant and was Deputy Director of the Biodiversity and Landscape History Research Institute. He has nearly 25 years of lecturing in ecology and environmental management at a variety of UK universities, has been a programme leader for both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, and has also been an external examiner for degree programmes and doctoral thesis. Peter has designed and led training courses in sustainable development and environmental assessment techniques in Britain and internationally. He has also been a facilitator and coach and regularly runs specialist training courses on environment economics, conflict management, environmental impact assessment, applied ecology and environmental management. Peter is an Editorial board member for four journals, He is a Member of the Institute for Ecology and Environmental Management (IEEM), and a Committee Member of IEEM's Training and Education Committee and Chair of Accreditation Review, and also a member of EUOPARC and the UK Environmental Law Association.

Richard Kotter Dip. Biol., M.A., PGCertRM is a Senior Lecturer in Economic and Political Geography, with an educational background in life sciences and environmental sciences and human geography and development studies at Tübingen University (Germany) and Sussex University (UK), and is a product of the ERASMUS scheme. and has benefited from a range of postgraduate EU academic training programme across Europe also. Richard researches into environmental and societal transformations, and urban and spatial change and planning in particular, with an interest in the socio-technical issues, but also community engagement. He reviews for a range of academic journals in geography and environmental sciences, and serves nationally on the UK's Geographical Association post-16 to HE committee, and moderates Access to Higher Education also for different providers. He is the current Programme Leader at Northumbria of the MSC in Disaster Management and Sustainable Development, with ties in with his own record of international humanitarian volunteering and (inter)national human rights campaign and coordination roles in a voluntary capacity.

Justine Wilkinson B.Sc. (Hons.), MPH, PGCE, is a Senior Lecturer in Environmental Health/Health Studies, and is a Chartered Environmental Health Practitioner with a local authority in the North East of England, with particular expertise in Public Health, Health and Safety and Food Safety and Standards. She qualified as an EHO in 1995 and has worked in local government in a range of roles including regulatory, educative, managerial and strategic. As a local government EHO Justine has responsibility for maintaining high standards of safety and health in businesses and safe production, handling and sale of food in food businesses. Justine completed her Masters in Public Health in 2007 and has worked on public health priorities at local, regional and national level with a particular focus on applying public health theory into practice. This work includes tobacco control, obesity, alcohol, accident prevention and management of a community health programme. She is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Her research is related to raising the profile of Environmental Health and the role that local government plays in influencing public health, including the wider determinants of health.