



**Work-Based Learning in the University of  
Ulster:  
Embedding employability in Business  
Studies**

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## **Summary**

This case highlights how the Business Studies degree programme in the University of Ulster incorporates the development of employability skills as an integral part of the preparation for, monitoring and assessment of work-based learning (WBL). It outlines the step-by-step approach adopted by the programme and highlights the role of web-enhanced student learning. The case identifies the University of Ulster's working definition of 'employability' and demonstrates how employability is embedded into the learning outcomes for work-based learning. In addition, it concludes with a review of the challenges of developing and maintaining opportunities for employability within Business Studies.

## **Objectives**

For the Business Studies degree programme, formal supervised work-based learning as one of the most powerful tools in developing employability skills among its students. Based on Purcell and Pitcher's (1996) categorisation of employability skills which is traditional academic skills, personal development skills and enterprise or business skills, the Course team has agreed the following objectives for WBL:

1. To develop and extend the study of academic disciplines;
2. To further develop the ability to relate theory to practice;
3. To reflect upon their experience within the world of work and evaluate their own performance and learning experiences within this environment;
4. To improve their interpersonal and social skills;
5. To demonstrate innovative thinking and creativity, knowledge of future trends in the subject area and be able to communicate new ideas effectively;
6. To make informed career choices and consider the professional requirements of those careers.

Additionally, these objectives are advancing the Personal Development Planning agenda within higher education. In this context, the issue of employability acts as a spur to students to see the relevance of what they are learning to their future career development. Work-based experiential learning within the programme provides the optimum level of connectivity with the world of work (SEDA, 2004). Despite the fact that 63% of graduates in Northern Ireland were reported to be in employment in 2003 (HEA, 2003), almost a third of graduate workers have previously been reported to be in non-professional jobs, six months after leaving university according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency's data for 2003. The need for graduate employability has never been higher and teaching it can help ensure that graduates have the ability, motivation and adaptability to fit the increasingly competitive graduate jobs market.

Support for the development of employability skills within the curriculum and the centrality of WBL in promoting employability is further evidenced within the University of Ulster formal committee structure. At Faculty level, a Placement Tutor's Group

formally reports to Faculty Board, via the Teaching and Learning Committee. This group facilitates the exchange of best practice across subject discipline areas, such as Accounting, Marketing, Human Resource Management and Hospitality and Tourism. At University level, a Sub-Committee on Work-Based Learning takes responsibility for considering strategic developments in the area.

The case will highlight how the programme objectives are achieved through an active partnership of student-university-employer within a formalised assessment process. This process is in adherence to the QAA Code of Practice on Placement Learning and based upon the Faculty of Business and Management' Placement Learning Handbook.

## ***Rationale***

In the 21st century, business faces the continual challenge of increasing levels of global competition and technological change. A company's success depends more than ever on having the skills to meet the challenges and on exploiting the opportunities brought by such change. Research shows that as occupations are changing, an increasing number of jobs require new skill-sets from graduates. The vast majority of employers prefer graduates with work experience and according to the Director-General of the CBI, Digby Jones, "who are ready to hit the ground running" (Prospects, 2003). It is for this reason that undergraduate programmes increasingly provide a one-year work-based learning opportunity. WBL aims to develop students' employability skills and commercial awareness, through a formal and structured process. This rationale is clearly evidenced within BEST's Student Employability Profiles (2004) which identify the attributes that employers seek in the graduates they recruit. These have been identified as:

- Cognitive skills/brainpower
- Generic competencies
- Personal capability
- Technical ability
- Business and/or organisation awareness
- Professional and practical elements

These generic employability competencies can be mapped onto statements within the Quality Assurance Agency's Business and Management subject benchmarks (QAA, 2000). The WBL assessment process enables students to identify examples of their own skills development and map these onto the list of qualities and attributes typically desired by employers. Students are able to translate their learning experiences into a language easily recognised by employers.

There is no universally agreed definition of 'employability'. One of the best known is that of Yorke and Knight (2004): '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.' Building on this, the Business Studies programme adopts the following definition from the Learning and Teaching Support Network (2003):

'Graduate employability is more than being able to find a job immediately after graduation. Rather it is the individual's ability to make an effective ongoing contribution to society, and lead a satisfying life thereafter. It includes qualities like resilience and resourcefulness, as well as technical knowledge and the ability to

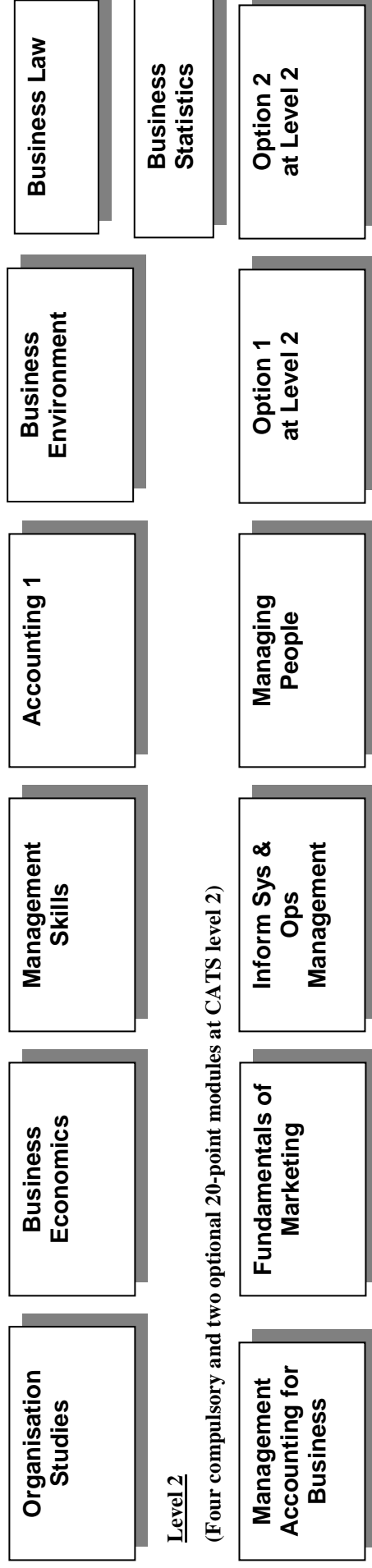
continue to learn in a changing environment. Such qualities are developed through the whole range of experiences which higher education offers.'

Figure 1 shows the programme structure for the University of Ulster's Business Studies degree and illustrates a holistic approach to the development of academic and employability skills. The course team has actively embedded opportunities for the development of employability skills within module teaching, learning and assessment strategies. For example, within the module entitled "Fundamentals of Marketing" student skills in team work, presentation skills and business and organisation awareness are assessed via a sector based product/service development group assignment. Work-based learning then enhances these types of skills in a realistic working environment.

**Figure 1 - Outline Structure of BSc (Hons) Business Studies**

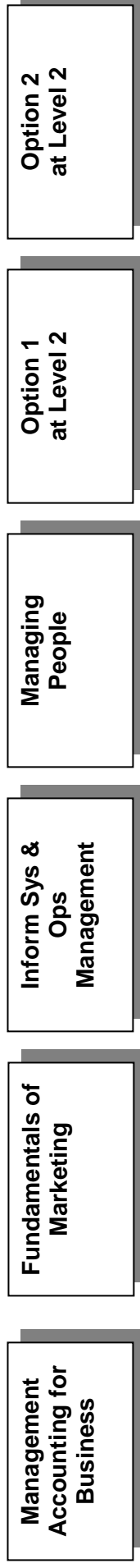
**Level 1**

(Five compulsory 20 point and two compulsory 10-point modules at CATS Level 1)



**Level 2**

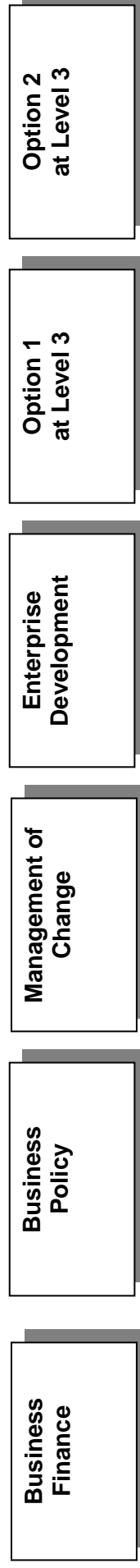
(Four compulsory and two optional 20-point modules at CATS level 2)



**Optional Placement Year**

**Level 3**

(Four compulsory and two optional 20-point modules at CATS level 3)



## ***Context***

The development and promotion of employability in the University of Ulster is central to the institution's Vision and Strategy to 2010 and has underpinned teaching and learning across all Faculties for many years. The university is characterised by a strong sense of a regional mission, placing it in the forefront of social and economic development in Northern Ireland. Many programmes of study are strongly vocational and reflect very active and mutually rewarding links with industry, commerce and the professions. Students cite the opportunity to develop employability skills as a reason for applying to their programmes of study.

Of the University's full-time undergraduate students, 45% are enrolled on programmes of study which include a year out, which is generally paid, compared to 8% for the UK as a whole (University of Ulster, 2004). Of students on the Business Studies programme 60% currently spend the third year of a four-year degree programme on placement. On successful completion of their programme, students are awarded an additional qualification known as a Diploma in Industrial Studies (DIS). The Business Studies degree is viewed internally as a flagship programme for building experience with employers and business through proactive partnership.

## ***Description of WBL Process and Assessment Strategy***

WBL preparation, monitoring and assessment of the period of work, and WBL debrief spans a period of three academic years. The process can be viewed diagrammatically in Figure 2.

Figure 2: THE WORK-BASED LEARNING CYCLE

**YEAR 2 PREPARATION**

**Semester 1**

**One Hour Sessions**

- Lectures
- Presentations
- Workshops

- Student Profile Forms
- Develop CV
- Employer Presentations
- Online self-assessment and Career Management Activities (PDP / Placement Systems)

**Semester 2**

- Application to employers
- Progress update on securing placement
- Interviews for placement
- Placement Induction by University Staff

- Students attend interviews
- Formally accept placement in writing
- Confirm date that placement commences

**YEAR 3 PLACEMENT**

**Placement in Industry**

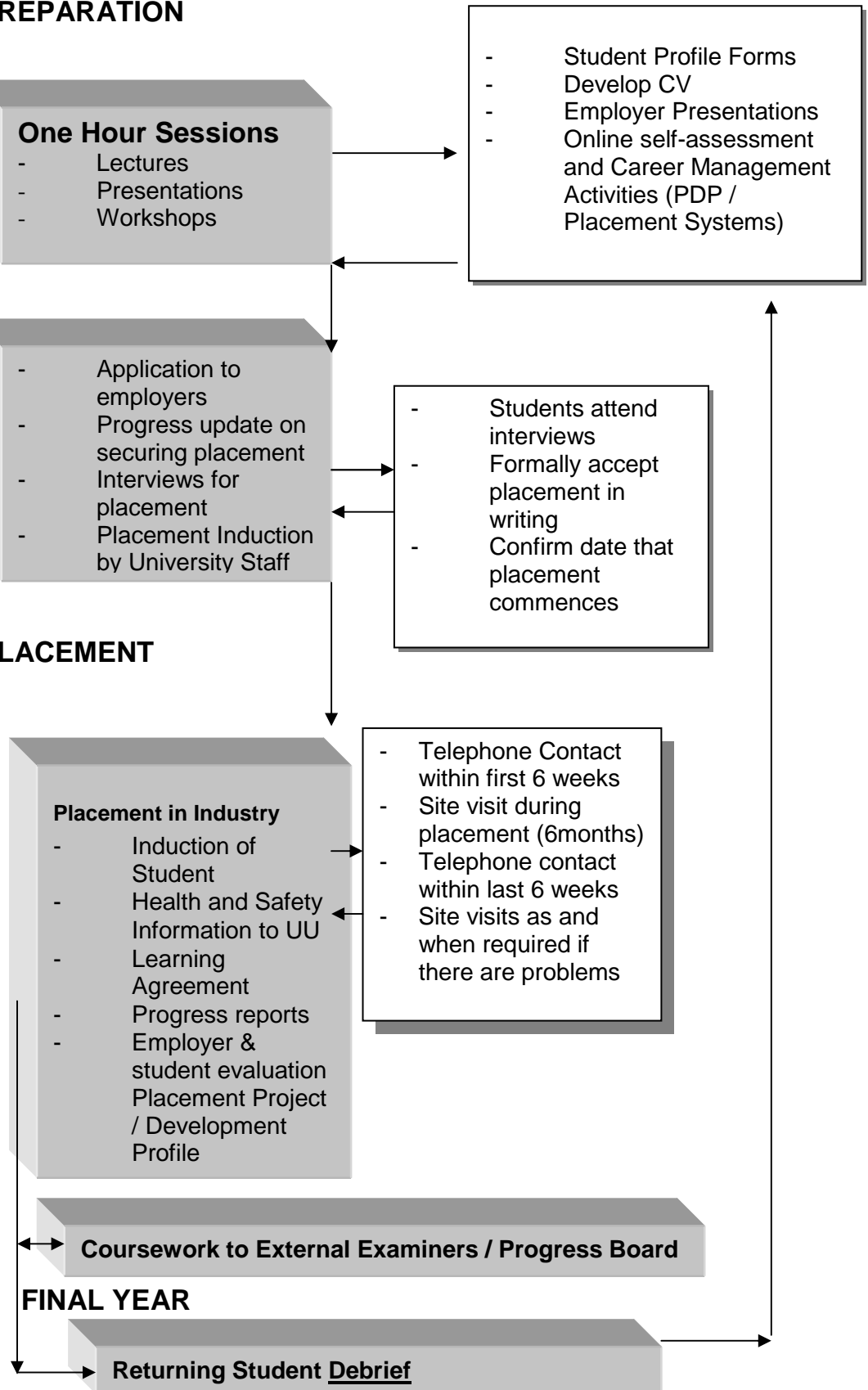
- Induction of Student
- Health and Safety Information to UU
- Learning Agreement
- Progress reports
- Employer & student evaluation
- Placement Project / Development Profile

- Telephone Contact within first 6 weeks
- Site visit during placement (6months)
- Telephone contact within last 6 weeks
- Site visits as and when required if there are problems

**Coursework to External Examiners / Progress Board**

**YEAR 4 FINAL YEAR**

**Returning Student Debrief**



## **Employability and the Online WBL Preparation Unit**

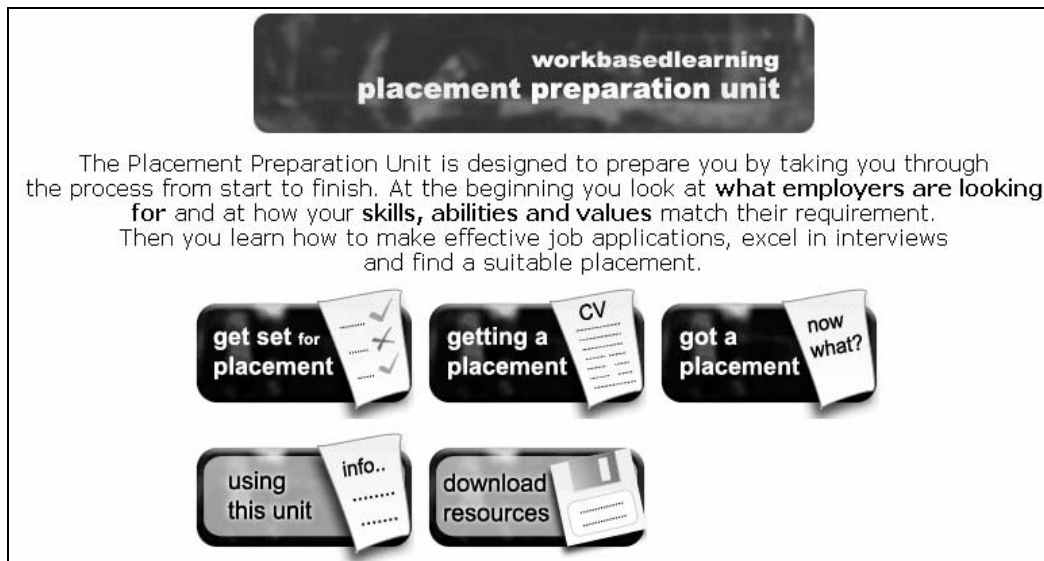
### **YEAR 2**

Placement preparation sessions commence in Year 2 in association with the Careers Service. These involve a series of lectures, workshop presentations from the Placement Tutor, employers, past and present placement students, careers specialists and advisors. Within this preparation there is a clear focus on developing the student's understanding of the need to develop their employability skills and this is supported by a university-wide online work-based learning system (WebCT). This incorporates a preparation for WBL unit and a CV-builder. The unit not only provides information and guidance on the WBL opportunities available, but also offers the students an opportunity to develop their own vocational profile through self-assessment and career decision-making activities (see Figure 3 for example of online student interface).

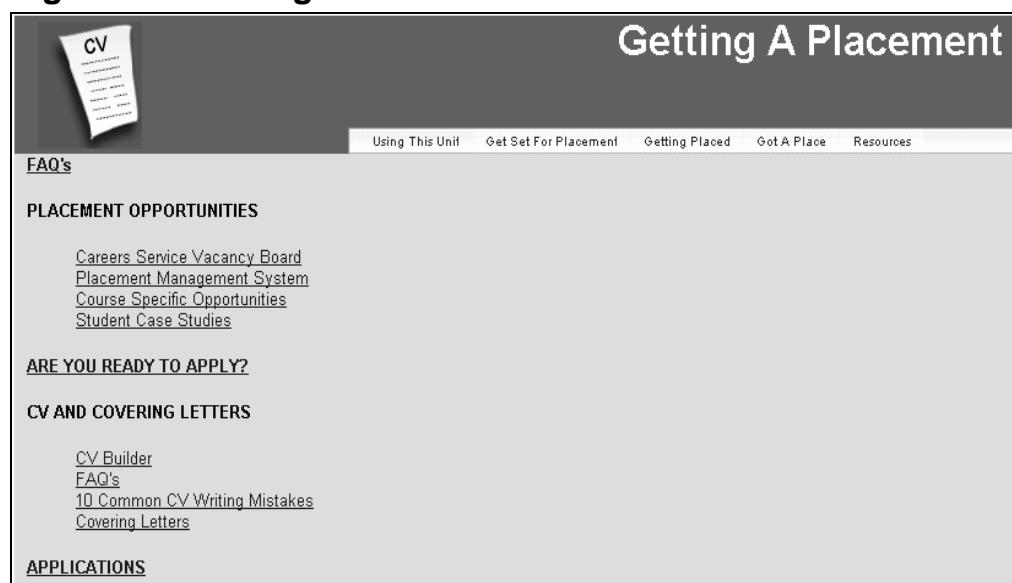
For a student considering the range of opportunities available and to avail of advice on how to utilise the recruitment process, information is provided on CV development, writing covering letters and on interview technique (see Figure 4).

A CV-builder utilises information from the student record/PDP system to assist students in the development of an appropriate undergraduate CV. Students can select a CV format to suit the needs of their professional area (see Figure 5).

**Figure 3. Online Student Interface**



**Figure 4. Securing a Placement Information**



**Figure 5: Customised CV Builder**

### Your CV Template List

**1. The Skills Based CV Created By UU Careers Service**

The skills based CV is most suited to those with limited work experience. Your skills and potential can be stressed and lack of experience or possible gaps in work experience de-emphasised.

**Status: NOT COMPLETE**

Create / Edit CV | PDF | HTML | Text (Word)

**2. The Conventional CV Created By UU Careers Service**

The conventional CV is most suited to students with well defined career goals, applying for jobs which build on previous education and/or work experience. It records your education, work experience, interests and achievements.

**Status: NOT COMPLETE**

Create / Edit CV | PDF | HTML | Text (Word)

**3. The Combined CV Created By UU Careers Service**

The combined CV is suited to both new entrants to the job market and those with work experience. It can be used when you have a clear job in mind, even if unconnected to your study and work background.

**Status: NOT COMPLETE**

Create / Edit CV | PDF | HTML | Text (Word)

WBL opportunities are brought to the attention of students, through student notice boards and web-based media to allow students to indicate their interests. CVs and/or application forms are sent to the company and the company shortlists in accordance with its normal recruitment procedures. Organisations who support the universities activities are drawn from both the private sector, ranging in size from small local indigenous SMEs to large international companies, and the public sector. These employers have a central role in helping the University of Ulster develop WBL policy and practice. The SME sector has particular significance for Northern Ireland in relation to increasing much needed work-based learning opportunities. The university has over many years engaged in a range of activities to create links with and support the development of local companies. A recent initiative for example, supported by Higher Education Innovation Fund, involves a three-year project to raise the competitiveness of the SMEs in Northern Ireland by developing various models of

WBL to meet the specific needs of that sector. Work will also focus on providing SMEs with online support for the recruitment and supervision of students.

## ***On-Placement and Assessment Process***

### **YEAR 3**

Supervision is viewed as a shared responsibility between the employer and the university represented by the Business Studies Course Team. At each student's appointment to an organisation an industrial supervisor/mentor is nominated by the employer to monitor the student's progress. A provisional training programme is formulated, which clearly identifies job/personal-related objectives and employability skills that are to be developed during the WBL period. Each student is assigned an academic supervisor, who is a member of the Business Studies Course Team, as well as their industrial supervisor/mentor.

The Business Studies monitoring format (UK and Ireland) is as follows:

- (i) On arrival at their organisation, the student completes a contact details form (Particulars of Placement), a Health & Safety Checklist and a Learning Agreement (this formalises the employability skills to be developed).
- (ii) The academic supervisor makes contact with the student, normally by telephone/email and an on-site visit:
  - The first telephone or email contact takes place within the first six weeks of placement
  - The visit normally takes place mid-way through the placement
  - The second telephone or email contact takes place within the last six weeks.

The purpose of the on-site visit is to allow the three parties involved in placement – the student, the industrial and the academic supervisors – to review the student's progress in meeting identified employability skills.

The academic supervisor completes a report form that forms part of the academic assessment of placement.

In order to support students further on international placements (outside UK/Ireland), contact will be made formally (either by email or by telephone) on a further two occasions. Wherever possible, the University endeavours to visit students on international placements. Where this is not possible, alternative arrangements are made and students are advised of these where appropriate.

A review of contact between the Business Studies students and the Academic Supervisors is carried out twice in the year, to ensure that students are maintaining an appropriate level of contact and are progressing satisfactorily in the placement.

## ***Assessment Strategy***

The elements of assessment are as follows:

### **Element 1**

Academic Evaluation:	Academic Supervisor's Report	Pass/Fail
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### **Element 2**

Industrial Evaluation:	Industrial Supervisor's Report	Pass/Fail
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### Element 3

Student written work:	Project	100%
	Personal & Professional	
	Development Profile	

The assessment strategy recognises the importance of employer feedback on student progress. In order to ensure consistency in employer feedback across placements, the Faculty issues guidance notes for employers, which clearly outline the assessment criteria for identified employability skills. Any queries regarding assessment can be discussed during the on-site visit. In addition, clear channels of communication are encouraged between Academic and Industrial Supervisors. This helps should any queries arise regarding the assessment process.

The development of generic assessment criteria for both project and personal and professional profiles have become essential in order to maintain consistency across the high number of internal examiners (Academic Supervisors) involved with placement. The ability to ensure consistency in assessment when dealing with a large number of employers and Academics has been commented on as a key strength by the external examiner for placement.

### ***Business Studies Programme - student written work***

Having established the Learning Agreement outlining their job-related and personal objectives at the commencement of the placement, the student completes an interim and final report reflecting on progress and performance during the period. This is one of the key methods used to encourage students to critically reflect on the development of their employability skills and to develop appropriate action plans.

At the end of the placement year students submit a Personal and Professional Development Profile. The aims of this profile are to:

- provide an opportunity to set objectives and critically reflect on personal and professional development;
- provide an opportunity to critically reflect on management of self and business impact.

On review of these profiles within the Business Studies programme, skills such as communication, confidence, teamwork and organisational ability feature frequently as desired objectives for placement. The value of placement is evident in the reflective commentaries provided by the students. One current student in a food and drink marketing organisation reflects as follows:

*“ From reflecting back since I first began on placement and looking at myself now, I can see a vast change. I am not only confident, but I have grown to become much more independent also by simply having my own car to travel to and from work has definitely made an impact in this area. I now have the ability to decide what I want with my career. I have interacted well with my work colleagues on a professional basis which too has resulted in a change in my personality”.*

Students also complete a project of 5,000 words, based either on an aspect of the their work, or on their overall placement experiences. The aims of the project will be to:

- provide an opportunity for a research based in-depth study or critical reflection of personal/professional development to include employability skills;
- encourage innovation where appropriate;

- display an ability to integrate information from a range of sources and research techniques;
- provide an opportunity for students to synthesise information and apply to organisation or self.

The subject of projects can be quite varied and has included such areas as:

- *The impact of low cost airlines on the travel industry.*
- *An assessment of quality control programmes for food and drink manufacturers.*
- *The role of event management in the marketing of the NI food and drink industry.*
- *A review of employee appraisal systems in the local council.*

### **Debrief**

In association with Career Services sessions in final year, Business Studies students are encouraged to reflect on the WBL experience in the formulation of graduate career plans. Students are normally required to present a snap shot of their placement experience to the students preparing for placement.

### **Evaluation**

As with any module of study within the Faculty, placement coursework is subject to the standard procedure for double marking and is moderated by an External Examiner. Students receive detailed feedback on their placement performance using relevant assessment proformas prior to their final year studies.

An evaluation of the work-based learning programme is gained from students through the completion of a questionnaire. On review of student responses, the general view is that students see the value of work-based learning and in many cases their attitude to work has changed. Having said that, many students feel that the placements were not what they expected and their initial career plans have changed as a result. Employers tend to evaluate the work-based learning process in their ongoing communication with Academics and feedback is generally positive after the initial few months. Issues that have arisen over recent years seem to be concerned more with international placements and students continuing their professionalism outside the work environment. In relation to academic feedback, academic supervisors can find the assessment of student reflection difficult and appreciate guidance and cross marking from the Placement Tutor as and when required.

University placement activity has received positive comment from QAA Subject Review teams, with both the general organisation of placement and arrangements for student preparation being recognised as of a high standard. Placement activity is also considered as part of the University's Programme Approval Management and Review and Annual Subject Monitoring processes. For example, as part of the 2002 / 2003 Annual Subject Monitoring process, an evaluation of Business Studies degree awards noted a better performance in the first class and second class upper division categories for those students who elected to complete industrial placement (See Table 1). This type of information is invaluable in highlighting to students the added value element of work-based learning

Table 1. The effect of WBL on degree classifications awarded 2002-2003

	TOTAL % 2003	With Placement % 2003	Without Placement % 2003
First Class	9.21	13.58	4.23
Second Class: Upper Division	60.53	70.37	49.30
Second Class: Lower Division	26.32	16.05	38.03
Third Class	0.66	0.00	1.41
Others	3.29	0.00	7.04
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

In addition, Higher Education Statistics Agency benchmarks for 2003 indicate that the percentage of Business and Management graduates that take up employment was 76.1%. In comparison, 81% of graduates of the Business Studies Programme entered employment in 2003, the majority of which had completed a WBL assessed period. A further 10% were in further study and only 4% were classified as unemployed and seeking work.

A review and evaluation of teaching, learning and assessment strategies associated with WBL across the University is currently underway and a key focus of this is the need to further enhance the methods by which employability skills are developed, measured and reflected upon. A review of placement learning outcomes across Faculties revealed a common emphasis on developing employability (transferable / key) skills and to a lesser extent, in developing subject-specific skills and knowledge of professional practice. As the QAA Code and relevant literature on developing employability support this focus on generic employability skills and the use of placement as part of personal development planning (PDP), the University feels that the learning outcomes of placement should focus on generic employability skills to help ensure relevance and consistency in assessment across Faculties. This focus on employability skills is particularly relevant to the Business Studies programme, where the associated graduate market is highly competitive and requires students to possess the “softer skills” to succeed in a business environment.

### ***Discussion and challenges***

The benefits of work-based learning are widely recognised in Northern Ireland and the University of Ulster continues to be the third largest provider in the UK of such programmes. Programmes such as the Business Studies programme are long established as a key provider of work-based learning opportunities within the University, providing benefits to a company such as:

- The cost effective employment of a business studies undergraduate for 1 year to contribute to a specific business project
- Close liaison with academic staff who will support the student and supervise the project to completion
- Highly motivated and skilled undergraduates who are willing and eager to learn;
- Undergraduates who have been exposed to the best in research-informed learning and who are up to date with the latest in business and management theory and practice.

WBL remains one of the key tools for adding value to a Business Studies student's University experience and to ultimate graduate employability. However, there remain several key challenges facing the course team:

1. Employers want graduates 'to hit the ground running', but there are fewer opportunities within the major blue-chip companies. Only 20% of graduates went into employment with the major blue-chip companies in 2003. Opportunities within the SME business sector are becoming increasingly more important, despite the fact that this sector needs additional support in professionalising student supervision.
2. Graduate numbers are expanding faster than the market for traditional graduate jobs; graduates are more diverse in age, social background and motivations, while the labour market they enter is more complex and volatile. Against this background, the need for life long learning as the ultimate employability skill needs to be integral in the design of teaching, learning and assessment strategies associated with WBL.
3. An increase in part-time working and student fees is beginning to decrease student motivation for a full-time one-year placement. However, the fact that all placements on the Business Studies Programme are paid may negate the impact of increasing student fees.
4. Many higher education staff within the course team may perceive the development of WBL as not generally associated with real institutional rewards – in contrast to the perceived rewards for research activity and RAE performance. Awareness and recognition of the value of developing employability within programme design could be more formally embedded within appraisal and promotional activities at higher education level.

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