Social Care Placement Development- a work in progress paper.

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Abstract
The Social Care Placement Team is carrying out development work in order to improve students’ employability and their preparedness for the workplace. The team is forging stronger relationships with placement providers in order to improve their experience of student placements. Partner organisations are being invited to help develop the placement unit in order to improve the employability of the future social care workforce. This is proving to be highly successful, with existing partner organisations welcoming a more personal, integrated approach.

Introduction and background
Students enrolled on the BA (Hons) in Social Care (in its final year as Social Change) can elect to complete the work based learning unit at Levels 5 and 6. For this, short placements are undertaken at a variety of organisations within the voluntary and education sectors. Students are matched according to their indicated preferences.

In recognition of the significant role that the placement experience can have in enhancing students’ employability, a dedicated Placement Development Co-ordinator was appointed in August 2012. Prior to this, placement sourcing and allocation was the responsibility of the academic tutors.

At this time, when competition for placements is so intense, it is vital that the Department of Social Work/Social Care furnishes partner organisations with students whose employability skills are of the highest calibre. Recognising this, the work to improve student employability has two strands: firstly, working with students pre-placement to improve their skills and knowledge; secondly, with partner organisations being more involved in the placement process as a whole. This paper explains what has been undertaken thus far and continues to discuss plans for the future.
Description of practice
The Placement Development Co-ordinator has been actively engaging new partners in all areas of Greater Manchester. Building on previously acquired knowledge of third sector provision, the pool of partner organisations has been widened and, since August 2012, 36 new agencies have been recruited. These vary from single entity, generic community resources to those with specific client groups such as the homeless or those with mental health needs, to national organisations such as Prince’s Trust and the NSPCC. Mindful of the current socio-economic climate, the Placement Development Co-ordinator has been keen to approach organisations that are developing, such as Foodbanks and, those involved in Welfare-To-Work programmes; organisations that will give our students an insight into the most contemporary of social care issues.

Initially, potential organisations were approached by email. More recently, they have also been sent a specially commissioned brochure. The Placement Development Co-ordinator then arranges to visit those interested to discuss the parameters of the placement unit in detail. All organisations, both new partners and those who have been on board for some time, appreciate this more familiar relationship, embracing an increased level of communication throughout the course of the placement. By actively spending time with our partners, the Placement Development Co-ordinator can gain a valuable working knowledge of their operations in order that, in turn, our students can best meet their needs and expectations. In addition, a robust, comprehensive process of feedback and evaluation of both the individual student and the placement experience as a whole is also now in operation.

Preliminary discussions with partner organisations have been extremely positive. All those asked have expressed a keen interest in joint working to improve the employability of the students. For example, an overriding concern is for the students to be able to demonstrate that they are forging links between what they learn in lectures, to what they see in practice. For the organisations time is an invaluable resource, they therefore expect our students to be self-motivated individuals who can act on their own initiative.

Currently 61 % of students undertaking the Work Based Learning Unit come from the Greater Manchester area. Recognising this, scoping work has begun to increase the number of local partner organisations from outlying areas such as Oldham, Rochdale, Bury and Bolton; 15 of the 36 new partner organisations are from these areas. These local organisations are keen to nurture the skills, experience and overall employability of their future workforce.

In order to strengthen community links and increase partner involvement, the Department are planning a ‘Social Care Partnership Event’. Over 80 organisations are invited to the innovative event, generating much interest. The afternoon will provide an opportunity for partner organisations to come together with each other and the academic staff to exchange thoughts on the placement experience present and future. An exhibition of creative writing and artwork produced by the students will provide a thought provoking backdrop for discussion.

There will be an opportunity to share information about the Social Care Department’s plans and identifying gaps in the employability skills that are specifically required in the social care
environment and to consider how to incorporate these into the unit. For the first time, partner organisations are being encouraged to be actively involved in the unit’s development. Providing such a contributory platform to our partner organisations will go some way to overcome the feeling of neglect that organisations are reported to feel in relation to course design (Lowden et al., 2011). Indeed, discussions have shown that one of the overriding reasons why partners commit to providing placements is so that they can actively shape the future social care workforce. Inviting them to have greater involvement can only serve to enhance the outcome for all, students, organisations and service users.

The placement team is keen to prepare students for the extremely competitive job market, beginning at the application stage. Therefore, we are suggesting that partner organisations ask students for CVs and invite them to a pre-placement interview rather than simply accepting them. The preparatory work being done with students on CV and interview skills is explained below.

In order to improve the efficacy of the placement experience for both partner organisations and the students, placements have increased from 60 to 90 hours at both levels. Six pre-placement sessions are now embedded in the unit, which aim to ensure that students are fully prepared for the workplace. One of these, facilitated by MMU Careers and Employability Team is on CV writing and interview skills. Other sessions incorporate various training issues, somewhat akin to those that new employees may receive. They explore the issue of equality and diversity in the workplace, communication skills, team building and workplace culture. Encouraging the students to consider these key areas will help to imbue in them a sense of integrity and commitment before they enter the workplace. The ‘Social Care Partnership Event’ will facilitate further discussion with partner organisations to establish other key knowledge areas they believe students’ require before entering the workplace.

The Department is committed to investing in our partner organisations. Since it is not possible to provide financial remuneration for placement provision, the team has been exploring other means of recompense. Plans are afoot to offer the above-mentioned training courses to our partners and source funding opportunities to extend this service further. Another project currently under evaluation is the possibility of a small cohort of placement students taking on an enhanced placement at an organisation to take on a specific piece of research over a longer period. This will not only benefit the organisations that so often do not have the resources to invest in such work, but will also increase the students’ employability skills. The Department is determined to develop these and other projects to provide mutual gain for the students, the Department and our partners.

**Conclusion**

The past six months have proved highly successful for the development of the BA (Hons) Social Care Work Based Learning unit. There has been a significant increase in both the number and variety of placement opportunities now available. Feedback from our partners is extremely positive and there is a genuine excitement about our future collaboration. It is hoped that the inaugural Social Care Partnership Event will provide a firm platform for ourselves and our partners to discuss how together we can best address our students’ employability.
References