

Negotiated Placements: Undergraduate Fine Art Study and Extended Opportunities for Self-Initiated Learning

Research informed Teaching (RiT Project 2008)



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Placement Institutions/Agencies

The Site Specific Module has been delivered, in collaboration with following institutions:

- Burslem School of Art
- Etruria Industrial Museum
- The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, all of which are located in Stoke -on-Trent;
- The New Art Gallery, Walsall
- The Tate, Liverpool (last 5 years). Only one event so far.
- Imperial War Museum North, Salford, (The host venues offered up specific sites/ areas for which our students made proposals for artwork based on their own individual responses to the 'site').

Self -Initiated Creative Arts Project (SICAP)

This model is delivered through collaboration with institutions initially identified and negotiated by individual students. In the last two years partnerships have been created with:

- Haregate Junior Youth Club, Leek: Mentor -Sarah Deighton – Youth Leader
- Newcastle-under-Lyme College, Staffs: Mentor - Paul Gosling
- Borough Museum in Newcastle, Newcastle-under-Lyme: Mentor - Tess Mason. (Manager)
- Cockshutt Primary School, Shropshire: Mentor - Mrs Dawson
- St. Benedict's Performing Arts Catholic School, Derby: Mentor - Mrs Morris (Head of Art)
- Mid Beds District Council, Youth and Community, Bedfordshire: Mentor - William Sparrow (Safety Officer)
- St Pauls (V.A) Primary School, Wrexham: Mentor - Mrs Nicola Booth (Headteacher)
- Wolverhampton Grammar School, Wolverhampton: Mentor - John Perkins (H.O.D)
- Brownie Pack, Walsall: Mentor - Mrs Rebecca Sly –Leader
- Heswall Primary School, Heswell, Wirral: Mentor - Mrs MacDonald (Headteacher)
- Earthborn Paints plc, Cheshire: Mentor - John Dison MD
- Hinstock School, Hinstock, Shropshire: Mentor - Denise Bidgood (Head Teacher)
- Woodhouse High School, Tamworth: Mentor – Louise Farrell
- Open Mic Events, Stoke also Blues/Jaz Festifal, Stoke: Mentor – Jason Lockett
- Heather Brae Centre, Cheshire County Council, Cogleton: Mentor – Pat Sparkes
- Manor Foundation School, Wednesbury: Mentor – Nicola Picken
- RapdTech Web Design, Bilston, West Midlands: Mentor – David Buckley
- Pelsall Village Primary School, Walsall: Mentor - changed
- Beth Johnson Rambling Group, Senior Citizens Centre, Hanley: Mentor – John Cope
- St Johns Primary School, Essington, Wolverhampton: Mentor Head Teacher Stuart Ayres
- Haregate Residents Association, Community Safety Partnership, Leek : Mentor - Clive Smith

The full listing of Partnership members form part of the research in 2009/10

The Evaluation of module experience is based at the faculty of Arts, Media and Design

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the host institutions or other parties. The illustrations used throughout this document are taken from the student case study files and full accreditation is part of the web-based materials yet to be uploaded to the appropriate university site.

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INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings of the Case Study analysis of 13 students (2007) and 17 students (2008), colleagues in their respective placements and contextual data related to these placements (proposals, written assignments, evaluations, and interviews). The specific intention of these case studies was to complement the quantitative data collected through performance indicators such as credit points for the modules or degree classification of the students who completed this module option and by studying the implementation process (placements) as close to the ground as possible. We aimed, through analysis and synthesis of documentary and interview data to identify the key issues and related learning points for all stakeholders. The case study framework reflected three dimensions of design and delivery:

- Management and co-ordination (Quantity of service provided by module coordinators and placement mentors)
- Staffing and Resources
- Student Access

Specific topics explored in some detail included:

- the process of involving outside agencies with placements
- the extent of engagement in partnerships - in terms of both initial planning activity and ongoing development
- the extent to which placements facilitate proposals (project success/evaluation)
- engaging different audiences

METHODOLOGY

During 2007–8 all students from the 2006/7 module cohort were invited to participate in the provision and analysis of their module experience. Thirteen volunteered to provide all materials including the commitment to the interview process. In addition, a further 4 representative students from earlier years offered observations pertinent to the modules under scrutiny. In 2008 a further 17 students submitted questionnaire data and image files.

We took a four-fold approach to each of the case study areas:

1. A study of relevant documentation

For further detail, please see the artists statements, summary of placement/proposals and the image banks on the website linked to this textual report. These were originally thought to be available on completion of this first year of the research but there remains gaps in the submission from respondents and difficulties in uploading the material to the university 'research' website. The latter relates to protocol and procedures (technician support/dreamweaver HTML) and this should be resolved in the second phase of this research 2009/10. Towards this end it is anticipated that a further application for RiT funding will be processed by the deadline date of the 16th February 2009.

2. An audit of provision
3. A series of observations (field work support)
4. A series of interviews with a range of students

Our interview complement included 13 respondents from Cohort 1:

5 SSS students
8 SICAP students

and 17 respondents from Cohort 2:

9 SSS students
8 SICAP students

Cohort 2 data was collected through a questionnaire modelled on the interview schedule and all 25 students were invited to respond with the same range of submissions before the end of December 2008. At the time of writing this report some visual materials are still pending but the students' observations and comments have been assimilated into this report.

KEY FINDINGS

Overall, our data revealed a high level of satisfaction and enthusiasm on the part of students. They appreciated a range of module characteristics, including: having a voice in the shape of the proposal, the type of placement, the time allocation, a range of tutorial support and feedback which both supported their own role as artists as well as providing a service to the creative community.

Behind these positive attitudes, our data revealed widespread, committed, resourceful personnel (placement support) from a range of agencies, both educational and commercial. However, this broadly positive picture has been achieved because of and/or in spite of a range of organisational and community challenges. Our research confirms that developing and running off-site modules was a challenging task. It involved maintaining strategic relationships with supportive agencies which had their own priorities, and which needed to serve a broader community, not just those within an art context. It involves harmonizing different expectations (university regulations /timeframes, student aspirations, diverse placement commitments, placement staff with different backgrounds and knowledge bases and tensions between them). It involved ensuring that students had access to appropriate support by engaging the most important gatekeepers of all: placement mentors.

The key issues, of which account needed to be taken in the development of such placements fell into the following three key areas.

1. Module Management and Coordination

- Designing, managing and delivering such module opportunities was challenging as it involves many complex tasks, including establishing and maintaining relationships with outside agencies (face-to-face contact, virtual links (email community) and correspondence exchanges), creating a team (student/placement mentor/module coordinator) from a diverse group and constantly striving to reach all participants, particularly the least confident students (Here the percentage of students diagnosed as dyslexic ranges from 20% to 30%).
- The role of a module coordinator is multi-faceted and challenging and effective module coordinators are supportive, flexible, approachable, motivated and understand creative problem solving. They must also have high professional standards and be sensitive to the different professional cultures represented in their module. They also need to maintain a constant focus on all stakeholders in the partnership. The right advice makes a difference and this responsibility is undertaken at present by one tutor only for each module option.

- Joined up working was much easier to achieve in placements that have pre-existing relationships with the university (local schools, colleges and museums).
- There was a danger that some local placements, while espousing very real support and enthusiasm for students, were at risk of diluting original proposals and reducing aspects of the task (allowing or encouraging students to adopt a more passive supportive role rather than risk 'unknown outcomes').
- Early clarification of purpose and support within the placement was very important - commitment, ownership and trust among partners appeared to be important factors contributing to the overall success.
- Similarly, clear roles and responsibilities must be in place for staff partnership staff, in order to facilitate adequate support for students. This appeared to be easier to achieve where communication was sustained over the placement.
- Placement mentors, and indeed module coordinators, widely reported enthusiasm for working in teams, despite the challenges involved;
- Productive links between partnerships enabled a culture of contextual enquiry and negotiated planning (familiarizing themselves with the concerns and expertise of their peers);
- Information sharing continues to pose challenges, as students with strong proposals (ideas) tended to be a little reluctant to share this with their peers in the early stages of project development
- One way in which module coordinators are attempting to overcome these boundaries was to share good practice retrospectively through 'case study material' on a designated website.
- The overwhelming impression was of partnership mentors from a range of disciplines striving to increase their accessibility. They generally welcomed the opportunity that the module provided for 'staying in touch with the wider educational network'.

2. Staffing and Resources (University Module Coordinators)

- Staffing levels represented the greatest difficulty in securing continuity and progression within these learning opportunities. The two staff responsible for providing the monitoring and development of these 'off-site' networks are both very much part time with current provision for one being a fraction of a 0.5 contract and the other currently 30 hours only, in semester 2. Consequently aspirations needed to be tempered by the number of students and the apparent fragile status of the modules in future strategic planning.
- One of the challenges facing module coordinators was indeed the uncertainty and tenuous nature of this module option within a competing climate of attracting student numbers in order to secure module viability. Anxiety may also result from late notice of contracts or delays in processing claims forms etc. Each of these contributes to morale and professionalism.
- Where staff who have a foot both in module coordination and studio practice/assessment they can understandably face conflicting management pressures and loyalties.
- Off-site placement coordinators face on-going challenges in respect of generating and maintaining the right skills mix. There was no particular factor underlying this, other than

the challenge of encouraging a varied community-based contribution with a range of different targets (reflecting students interests in teaching, social working, curatorial work and artists-in-residence).

- Ensuring that placements offer the appropriate environment, guidance and support was a further challenge for staff endorsing student proposals.

3. Partnership involvement

- Placement mentors in partnership institutions are widely contributing to the task of managing the placement. However, some projects appeared to place more emphasis on an 'activity' rather than a reflection on the relationship between this process and the students 'studio practice' (implicit/explicit use)
- Staff, in general, appeared to be treating students as important sources of information and potential innovators ('new audiences', 'outreach network' links related to the module intervention)

Placements appear to have a positive image of the module participants, both in terms of the level of engagement with the contextual issues, and (overall) the commitment to active participation

- The few reservations expressed by partnership schools (mostly secondary 11-18 years) revolved around the priority of external pressures such as the 'National Curriculum' or examination constraints. This said, all timetabling difficulties were resolved through amicable negotiation

CONCLUSIONS – POLICY AND PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

- The findings we have summarised above carry both implicit and explicit messages for policy and practice. This section both echoes and further underlines the importance of the following insights.

Management of SICAP and Site Specific Study Modules

- The implementations of off-site placements require an early commitment to developing clearly defined protocols in respect of the relationship between the partnership, the university and the student. Module coordinators are crucial to the development and maintenance of partnership working. Insightful and enthusiastic placement mentors can take strategic action in order to maximise the opportunity for their respective placements.
- Targeting of provision poses considerable challenges to the establishment and/or maintenance of local partnerships. Both geographical and financial boundaries have the potential to cause difficulties for both module coordinators and students.
- Of necessity students may elect to identify a potential placement from outside of the region and in the period covered by this report (2 Cohorts) students have undertaken placements in Buckinghamshire, Cheshire, Manchester, Milton Keynes and London. The targeting of resources (assuming basic provision from host institutions) on the basis of these restrictions may generate tensions between students and the targeted initiatives. In some cases students supplement funding and invariable travel to partnership sights at their own expense. Provision for these modules is modest as there is no fund for materials, travel or the production of the illustrated reports produced by students as the assessed project overview and evaluation. The monitoring of progress by placement

mentors is a quid pro quo arrangement, based on the benefits that the student provides for the host institution. Occasionally however, some museums have found funding to facilitate projects. An example being the IWMN who contributed £300.00 to allow the placement to take place in Sept 2007. This covered materials and travel for one student to lead the project and three to assist over a four-day period.

- Because this range of support entails different levels of basic training for the student aspects of 'conduct in the workplace', 'child protection requirements', 'bodies of knowledge' and 'ways of working' are routinely covered by the host institution and, where appropriate, built into the student's aims and objectives. Support for 'multi-disciplinary ways of working' is provided in an ad hoc form supplemented by the knowledge and experience of module coordinators.

Meeting the needs of diverse students and their respective placements

- The open-ended design of the modules poses considerable challenges for overcoming access to new institutions. Module coordinators and partnership staff need to share knowledge and experiences. This may help minimise the risk of inadvertently overlooking needs or aggravating contextual tensions.
- The involvement of students in feedback tutorial session often pays dividends in terms of identifying issues and strategies. Whilst the modules are inevitably dominated by the university timetable, there is a serious commitment to negotiated learning and personal professionalism.
- Placements have the potential to be delivered outside usual hours of study with some electing to work in evenings, weekends and holiday periods. More diverse delivery patterns maximised the chances of involving working with other groups (youth clubs, referral units (PRU) etc.)

The impact of workplace issues on students

- For many students working with others requires considerable planning in the consideration of the size, capacity, ability and quality of learners. This appeared fundamental to the achievement of module objectives (The initial proposal/design may have overestimated the availability of participants both in terms of numbers and skills). One specific helpful strategy, in addition to regular group tutorials, may be for students in close proximity (geographical location) to share information about organization and strategies using Internet tools (community websites).
- All students needed to understand the importance of professionalism in that projects frequently impact on a range of personnel. Much could be achieved by being friendly and accessible. Simply 'being a professional' in terms of an artist would not, in the eyes of colleagues (teachers/parents/others), automatically guarantee success in the role

Engaging with others

Reaching any new community is not a one-off task. Consideration of an appropriate outreach strategy is crucial, as module coordinators need to harmonise intentions and 'fine tune' in accordance with the social context and community. In the case of museums and galleries (sometime perceived as 'hard to reach' owing to their own pressing targets and timetabling requirements), it was even more important to find ways of attracting them to thoughtful and relevant proposals.