

The Scholarship of Engagement for Politics



House of Commons by Natasa Pantelic

Oxford Brookes University and round two placement student

*Green
Small
Hard to see
Order! Order!
He shouts with glee.*

*Honourable friend
Right honourable member
Shout
Laugh
Tory pretender.*

*Attlee, Churchill
Thatcher, Blair
Dennis, Jack, Ruth, Clare
William, Ken, David, Anne
Charles, Sarah, Chris, Dan.*

*Clocks tick
On the air
Papers here
Papers there
And he sleeps.*

*Red, blue, green, mauve
Bible
Mase
Tights
Robe.*

*Will she give way?
Could he agree?
Is she aware?
Can he not see?
I will make progress.*

*Labour women
Conservative men
Independent
Scottish
Irish
Lib Dem.*

*Green
Small
Hard to see
Order! Order!
He shouts with glee.*

Foreword by Glynis Cousin

This project has been outstandingly successful in so many ways. It has considerably enhanced the learning experiences of all the students who have been its beneficiaries. It enlivened students' experiences, connected concepts with practices, raised motivation and excitement and positioned students as contributors.

The project has already done much to meet the challenges universities face when providing placements to students, including the provision of templates and guidance for successful placement study and schemes. It has also shown through the examples of the partners how placement practice can move into the mainstream of programmes.

Many congratulations to the project team for a project that has made a strong contribution to the enhancement of the politics student experience.



Glynis Cousin
HEA advisor

The Scholarship of Engagement for Politics

The Scholarship of Engagement for Politics was a three year FDTL5 project, funded through HEFCE, whose main aim was to develop, evaluate and promote research-based placements as a formal dimension of the Politics and International Relations curriculum in UK Universities.

The project sought to link research to placement learning by negotiating with each student and placement provider to identify a particular research task that the student would undertake during their placement. The aim of this move away from traditional 'work-experience' towards more research based learning was to encourage students to question what they learned during their placement and better appreciate the link between abstract theories and concepts and reality.

Before the primary work of the project was undertaken, a national survey to analyse placement learning provision within UK Politics/IR Departments was carried out. The results indicate that of the ninety-six UK and Irish Higher Education Institutions identified in our survey in which Politics/International Relations is taught at undergraduate level:

- Sixty-five do not offer any kind of placement learning:
 - ▶ Nineteen are post-1992 universities or their Irish equivalent
 - ▶ Forty Six are pre-1992 universities or their Irish equivalent.
- Of the remaining thirty-one institutions:
 - ▶ Fourteen are post-1992 universities or their Irish equivalent.
 - ▶ Seventeen are pre-1992 universities or their Irish equivalent.
- In all except one case, placements were over ten weeks in duration.
- Only eight of the thirty-one placement schemes identified run in the second year of the undergraduate curriculum.
- Some placements are available to all students, but most select, with take-up being on a voluntary basis.
- Occasionally there is a special placement module, but often the work is managed and assessed out of an existing module.
- Placement work is often focused upon skills rather than the discipline.

Who'd have thought something that you learn in a classroom would actually be relevant in real life! The main reason I undertook this placement was to see how much was relevant, and to see the actual, physical consequences of the theory that is learnt in lectures, so this was particularly useful as far as I was concerned.





I mean when we're sitting in lectures, when we're sitting in seminars, we hear about talk about party lines, about party whips, about house regulations and all of those sorts of things. But I guess seeing it in action..... I don't think that you can necessarily get that from a textbook.

Throughout the project 36 students from Warwick, Coventry and Oxford Brookes Universities were placed with local and regional government agencies, political actors, non-governmental organisations, and the voluntary sector.

The placements were

- of short duration (between one and eight weeks);
- run during the academic year alongside a student's programme of study;
- regional wherever possible (to minimise financial costs);
- linked to a specific module;
- structured by the learning outcomes of those modules;
- formally assessed.

The project team acknowledged from the outset of this project that there are logistical, resource, and institutional issues in developing opportunities for the scholarship of engagement. This project sought to test and offer a menu of alternative models that could then be adapted for bespoke usage by Politics and International Relations Departments and provide templates for other institutions to use in setting up their own placement initiatives.

The templates available on the project website are:

- Placement Provider Application Form
- Information for Placement Providers
- Health and Safety Guide for Placement Providers*

- Placement Provider De-Brief Form
- Student Application Form
- Information for Placement Students
- Health and Safety Guide for Placement Students*
- Partnership Agreement
- Authority to Start Placement*
- Placement Student De-Brief Form

*Taken from H&S policy drafted by USHA (Universities Safety and Health Association) for UCEA (Universities and Colleges Employers Association)

Our research to date demonstrates that moving the emphasis of placement learning from 'work experience' to 'research-led learning' in Politics/International Relations can have a solid and perceptible effect upon enhancing the student experience. Our full evaluation report will be hosted on the project website but over the following pages we hope the experiences of the three main stakeholders in the project: the students, the placement providers and the project team, will encourage others to develop placement schemes within their own institutions.



The Student Experience

The Time Of My Life

The Lobby

A group of people, some from UNISON, came in to lobby Andrew on the Local Government Pension Scheme. I was invited to sit in and I just found the whole session invaluable. It was so interesting to watch and listen to the discussion that took place. Once again, the experience put lobbying and the work of an MP into perspective.

Tabling Parliamentary Questions

Andrew went through the questions I proposed to ask, some we decided not to put forward and others were amended or left as they were.....the answers will be written for next week, so I'm really excited to see the replies I receive. I typed up the questions and instead of emailing them, I wanted to do the traditional thing and post them myself.....It was very exciting and I can't wait for next week!

Me and Pete then popped over to Westminster Hall. I looked at the statues in St Stephen's Hall, and it's just great recalling the History of this amazing institution. My

favourite statue is of Viscount Falkland.

A suffragette handcuffed herself to him and she could only be released by breaking his sword. You see the crack in it, where somebody somehow put it back together and it's just amazing.

When Will I See You Again?

I walked out of the Palace of Westminster at about fifteen minutes past seven of the clock (just so funny!). As I walked towards the station I was wondering when I would see this magnificent place again? I had one of those movie moments, when I realised there and then that I definitely want to work for an MP in Parliament after university.

I have had THE BEST two days, they will be the highlight of my placement. I am just so grateful to Pete and Andrew for giving me the opportunity to do what I have done this week. I mean seriously invaluable stuff, even mastering the photocopier! Of course the constituency office has also taught me invaluable skills too, but this week has just been magical.

I've just learnt so much more because you learn the theory but there's so much more to the European parliament than you'd imagine. They're constantly in plenary sittings, constantly in votes. I do think they have quite a lot of influence now. Every day you've got questions so you're constantly researching and constantly finding out and you just absorb loads from being there.

NGO Placement

Oxford User Team is a charity run by ex-users for drug users in Oxfordshire. They mainly provide information about harm reduction, overdose prevention and advocacy among other things.

Well! the first two days were quite busy, I'm sure lots of people felt as though they were out of their depth- I still do! OUT is one of the most successful user-led teams in the country and its frequently asked to provide training for other counties setting up teams. So my first two days were spent with quite a few people in quite a small room taking part in advocacy training, i.e. learning about taking on cases for drug-users who are having difficulties with housing, prescriptions etc. It's certainly a complex

web of service providers/ government/law. The OUT team have amazing knowledge of how all the different actors co-operate (or are supposed to co-operate!) There is a lot to be learned!

The next week was spent designing a questionnaire and the outline of a user consultation day that is coming up in Slough. Glenda wanted questions that would provide qualitative and quantitative data for a report that will be sent to local government on users' experience of local drug-treatment services and their experiences with pharmacies, drug-workers etc. I spent quite a long time dusting off forgotten research skills and trying to remember how Excel works!

Day 5

Last Day

Today was my final day at my placement, and to be honest I will miss it, I don't want to go back to lectures! I loved working in a political environment, it was really interesting. I may even consider becoming a councillor in a few years time, we'll have to see. All the people were great. I learnt a lot about local government, it was very complicated at first, but I've now got my head round it, structure wise. This experience has helped me decide that yes, I could work in an office...

I spent today working on my project, which is all finished now. I expanded on and evaluated the guide for prospective candidates that the council already had. I cut some bits, added others, updated facts and added some pictures of 'urban renaissance'.

I'd like to thank everyone involved with the project because it was a really worthwhile experience and everything was really well organised, my week was really busy. I wasn't like a 'tea boy' or anything, like the traditional view of work experience. This experience has definitely helped me and has been eye-opening.

The Provider Experience

Eighteen placement providers hosted a total of 36 placements throughout the three rounds of placements in our project. A variety of placement opportunities were developed with MPs, MEPs, regional government offices, local government, and non-governmental organisations. Below are some of our providers' reflections on their experiences of hosting placements for the project.

"The reason I decided to take on students is because I know from my own experience, having studied politics at Coventry University, that very little is being taught about Local Authorities. When I first started to work as a Political Assistant, it took quite a while to get to grips with what County Council/District Councils and Town Councils actually do. I think it is hugely important to teach about local democracy as the general public is very confused about a local authority's responsibilities. I wanted to give this experience to the students and also make them aware of the career possibilities both within local authorities and also within the political world outside Westminster.

I do think the placements did open their eyes to the variety of work that takes place at the County Council. I also think that the students that were with me were quite astonished by the amount of work that takes place behind the scenes for an event that includes local politicians and MPs, and that it is not only about kissing babies' heads and shaking hands but in fact 99% of the time it's about hard work, only 1% of which is in the papers and on the news."

Niina Kaariniemi
Oxfordshire County Council

I would say it's useful to us to let someone see what actually happens and it's useful for them because they learn the truth rather than the theory. For us that's useful in itself, plus the fact that they actually get to relate and they can see what careers they want to follow.

'As a placement provider we found hosting students through this project a very worthwhile experience. It was really helpful on a practical level having the students with us because this is a busy constituency office and we can always do with another pair of hands.

The students just came in and with guidance picked up what they could most effectively help with. I think they benefited a lot from having a real interest in what we do.

We also benefited from an outside influence, because we're a relatively small office. It was good to have other people in to hear their experiences and it was nice for us to be able to impart some knowledge and useful experience as well. The students also had a taste of what it's like working at Westminster.

The students were pretty well ready to go when they arrived. We just talked through with them the kind of work that we do and the way the office runs. Following their placements, they could now go for a job with an MP and honestly say that they have got real experience and an understanding of what's involved. They will also be well placed to approach an MP or their office on issues they want to take up.'

Andrew Smith
MP for Oxford East

When she first arrived and I found out she was going to write a paper on the question of pulling sovereignty we set up interviews with several MEPs from the Conservative delegation here so that she could get different perspectives.

I think the project was very useful, they were desperate to have an extra pair of hands anyway and it was good to have someone who was reasonably up to speed.....it was nice to have someone who was able to do a little bit of research and had some research skills so I think that was very useful.

Our Experience



Steven Curtis

is Senior Lecturer in International Relations at London Metropolitan University. He was a research fellow on the project from 2005 to 2007 and reflects below on his experience as a member of the FDTL team.

Within the FDTL project we demonstrated that it is feasible to embed an element of placement learning in the Politics and International Relations curriculum and showed that even placements of relatively short duration can significantly enrich students' experience of their degree subject. Devising placements incorporating specific research projects undertaken for the placement providers meant that the students were engaged in meaningful activities and learning opportunities were maximized.

I was impressed with our students' commitment and resourcefulness, how they took responsibility for learning from their experiences, and especially with the research skills which they developed and displayed on their placements. One of our main general findings is to stress the importance of extending opportunities for undergraduates to undertake research, from which they too often tend to be excluded.

Requiring students to keep a blog of their experiences was very important, both to the management of the placements (the project manager and the rest of the team were able to keep track of each student's progress without intervening through phone calls and emails), and to the students' reflections on their placement activities. They seemed to relish putting down their thoughts at the end of each day in a way that would be unimaginable with paper-based learning logs that no one else could view. In this case, the medium made a substantial difference to the message.

Although our main focus was on enhancing student learning through engagement with the real world of politics, we also found that short placements could make important contributions to our students' employment prospects. A good proportion of those students we sent on placements went on to apply for similar or related internships and jobs, using their placements as stepping stones. For those with no prior experience, a placement opened doors. Some of our students were retained by their placement providers. Of these, one went on to become the manager of her placement provider's constituency office in a very short time, putting the knowledge acquired on her degree course to excellent use; another remained involved with a project she worked on during her placement with an NGO, ultimately participating in a conference in South Korea.

In terms of their personal development, all of the students we placed came away with a story to tell, a narrative of how they undertook a particular research project and how they dealt with the challenges and problems

they encountered. We showed that, paradoxical as it may seem, one of the best means of enhancing employability is by explicitly not focusing on the work-experience element of placement learning.

A key dimension of the Scholarship of Engagement is the establishment of partnerships between universities and their neighbouring communities. I greatly enjoyed meeting local political actors and was taken with their enthusiasm for our project. Frequently their offices turned out to be only a few minutes' walk from the campus, yet we had had no opportunity or occasion to meet before.

Finally, on a more personal level, involvement with the project gave a significant boost to my academic career, proving it is not necessarily the case that time spent on the development of tools for teaching and learning is time that would be better spent on conventional research for publication.

I think you gain a new respect for what you're studying because you see what's going on and you see how things are changing or you can make a difference to someone's life.

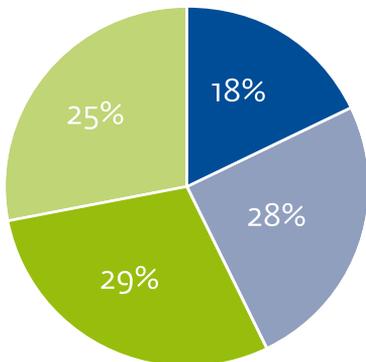
I think the main method of how I learnt was talking to other people and they were having a really good chat with the chief executive and he was basically telling me what role NGOs played in society. I didn't really appreciate the importance of NGOs until I talked to him. It's really convincing and ... yeah he gave me a brief insight into how NGOs influence government policy.

Long-term Impacts

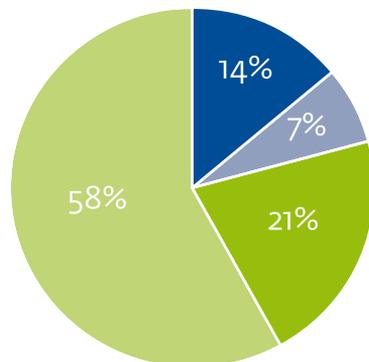
Analysis of this feedback and all of the qualitative and quantitative data collected is detailed in the project evaluation report to be hosted on the project website.

Qualitative and quantitative data was collected throughout the FDTL project from all three stakeholders involved – the students, the placement providers and the project team. The project team wanted to capture not only the students' experiences while they were on placement and shortly afterwards but also to analyse the longer lasting impact on the students and their studies. These longer term impacts were captured through questionnaires sent to students 6 months after their placement had ended; some of the responses are shown here.

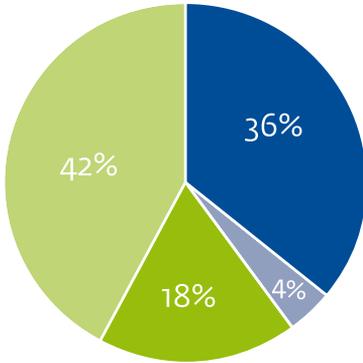
I was able to apply some key concepts and theories while on placement



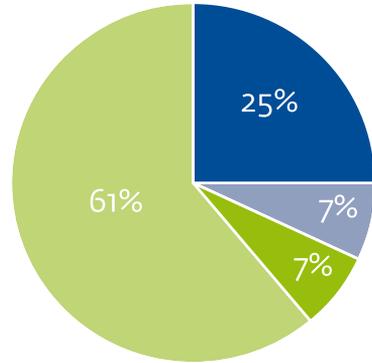
I was able to use my experience of placement in assignments



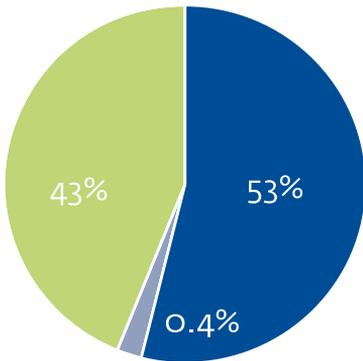
I found the placement helped my understanding of 'politics'



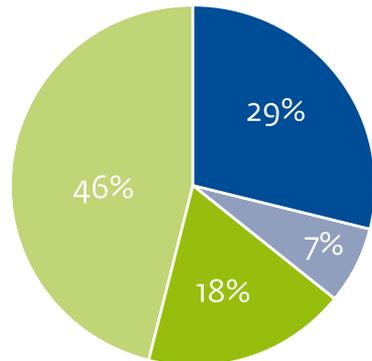
I gained skills that I think will be useful when I begin work



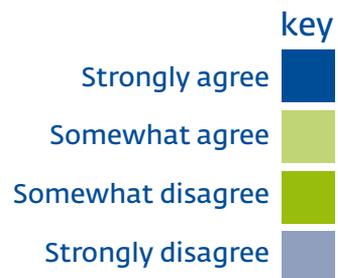
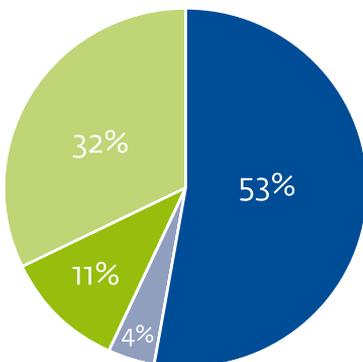
I learnt a lot on placement



The impact of the placement has exceeded my expectations



My experience at University has been enriched by my placement





The Scholarship of Engagement for Politics

www.politicsinaction.ac.uk

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