

STUDENT PORTFOLIO – A TOOL TO ACHIEVE QUALITY IN TRAINING

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Abstract: *The key objectives that contribute to quality placement and good practical education are summarized by the following requirements: precise learning objectives, clear identification of rights and obligations of each of the partners involved, written and signed agreement, repeated contact between partners and feedback, documentation of student activities and formal recognition of the placement. In order to comply with the requirements and to secure a quality learning experience for students the portfolio of the students may and should represent not only a way to register activities during placement but also a complete kit of all the documents needed by the parties involved.*

Key words: *students' placement, portfolio, career plan, quality in higher education.*

1. Introduction

Students' placement is an activity that allows students to put into practice theoretical knowledge that he/ she acquired during university studies and to form new and complex competencies. The main objective of practical placement is to offer opportunities to interact with professionals from the domain the students are studying. From the learning point of view, practical placement is a special learning activity because it takes place outside the university space (which represents the traditional frame for learning) and implies the involvement of three entities: university, enterprise and the student.

Learning process during placement has some characteristics that are different from learning in academic institution and in the same time completes and supplies

opportunities that contribute to a better use of theoretical knowledge. Learning during placement is more collaborative comparing with individual learning in university. Working in co-operation with colleagues is promoted but in the same time the student is required to do a job by him/ herself. Learning during placement produces implicit and tacit knowledge that generates specific competencies. The student is viewed as an employee and sometimes he/ she may be confronted with challenges and tasks that are completely new. Diversity of learning opportunities is strongly encouraged. The student is involved in extra work and in an extra study context that promote specialisation. Theories regarding leaning during practical placement received different names such as apprenticeship theory or situative theory, but regarding the name, all authors

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agreed upon the importance and the huge contribution that placement has on academic success, career planes and employability of the graduates [7], [9].

2. The role of practical placement in Higher education

In almost all European countries there is legislation that enacts higher education and besides legislation there are organizations that supervise, monitor, offer accreditation or amend the educational process in higher education institutions from their countries. Examples of such organisations are: Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education from Great Britain, established in 2001, Quality Assurance Agency and National Agency for International Educational Programmes, from Norway (2006), Operational Program for Education and Initiative in Professional Education (2005, Greece), Assessment and Accreditation Agency for Tertiary Education (Portugal), Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (2007, Denmark), Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (Romania, 2007) [17].

All this Agencies operate under legislative framework and monitor the quality standards for tertiary education. There are also research and projects that stipulate the quality requirements in higher education that can be apply to quality standards for practical placements [5], [15], [18], [19]. Quality placements should target activities that aim to satisfy the following competencies in students:

- critical thinking and systematic understanding of the domain from the perspective of the specialist;
- assessment ability of complex situation and capacity to formulate problems;
- capacity to work independently, to plan and to implement specific actions;
- capacity to make judgements and to decide;

- originality in using theoretical knowledge in practice and in research;
- effective and appropriate communication skills;
- initiative and responsibility;
- self awareness and understanding of personal limitations;
- independent, critical and self-reflective thinking;
- ability to complete the portfolio in an organised and integrative manner.

In order to support the above objectives it is important to assure an environment where multidisciplinary and diversity of experience is sustained.

Practical placement is also a time to test existing competences, to check if a job is suitable for a person, to come into contact with some specific situations such as organizational culture, the organization's values, work behaviour code, a new type of working relationships, and so on.

At European level there is no unitary system to organize practical placement and to assess the outcomes of such an activity. The law allows university autonomy and support more than one model in implementing learning process. Practical placement may be compulsory (in some study programs like medicine, teaching, architecture, engineering or tourism) or it may be optional. In some countries, like Romania, placements are compulsory in all study programmes. In Universities or in collaboration with universities there are career centres and vocational counselling services that assist students in identifying, applying and completing the period of practice.

Depending on the agent that initiates and is responsible for organising placements there are three major strategies:

1. the main responsible is the higher education institution;
2. the main responsible is the student;
3. the main responsible is the host enterprise.

No matter who initiate the placement the benefits can be identified at all levels. The university has the opportunity to plan and organise an activity that highly contributes to the increase of employability rates of its graduates. The enterprise has the opportunity to establish contacts with potential human resources, reducing the costs for future trainings. The student has the chance to be involved in real work place, often to be paid for his contribution and to gain experience regarding his future profession.

Nonetheless who is responsible for the placement all three parts become involved and should collaborate in order to assure a positive outcome from the experience. In organising and coordinating practical placement very important issues that must be taken into consideration are the following:

- the role of practical placement (as part of the curricula, an efficient way to recruit and select the future employees, an experience that enrich learning and promote training of new competences);
- the match between students educational needs and the offer from the enterprise;
- the kind of documents necessary to legislate the collaboration (agreements, contracts, convention, etc);
- which are the resources available (career centres, web sites, data bases, workshops, training staff, job fares);
- what kind of assessment and recognition is available and mandatory (including documents, ECTS, references available, academic and enterprises staff cooperation);
- how transition from university to enterprise and vice-versa is made possible.

All of the above questions are important to be asked before stating the placement in order to fulfil the main objectives of the practical placement:

- development of the ability to relate theoretical knowledge with practical ones;

- development of working skills;
- identification with the professional role;
- development of new competences and exercising the existing ones;
- planning, completing and assessing projects or professional tasks (including diploma paper or PhD dissertations);
- exercising critical and self-reflective thinking;
- development of communication skills with different categories of people (from clients to superiors);
- training independent work skills and working with dead lines;
- gaining awareness of personal level of training and professional skills that are needed;
- planning career and managing professional path.

Scientific literature and experience from academic environment showed repeatedly that good quality of placement is assured if learning outcomes are clear and acknowledged by all stake holders involved [1], [2], [13], [16]. They have to respect their rights and obligations and this information must be included in a written and signed agreement.

The repeated contact and constructive feedback are very important and many experienced participants recommend between two to five in person visits of the supervisor from the university to the site of the practical placement, along with phone and email contacts [3]. The time reserved by each tutor per students per week vary between 0.2 to 2 hours in order to assure an adequate monitoring of students' activities. Their activities must be documented and proves of their work must be required. In assessing the placement it is important to involve both the tutor and the student [14] whose self evaluation may represent a useful feedback for the enterprise and/ or university and an important method to enhance learning.

Also the existence of a system of recognition and accreditation of the placement is important even when the placement is not a part of the curricula.

The best results are obtained if from the beginning the placement is seen as a part of a career plan of every student. As people responsible of managing their own personal professional path it is important that students succeed to integrate practical experience from enterprises in their training and future expertise.

Last, but not least, anytime when practical placement takes place, the regulation on safety and health assurance must be checked and guaranteed.

3. Students portfolio – different facets

The importance of practical placement became recognised at international level, but there is still little agreement on how can be assured the benefits of this activities [8]. There are no contradictions regarding the important role that placement may have in professional training and in increasing chances to enter successfully on job market but there are no consistent procedures on how to organise and to exploit the benefits that come along with a well managed experience.

There is a need that is more and more recognised for unified methods that can answer the expectations and necessities of all parties involved: university, students and enterprise. In the following paragraphs we will argue that a possible solution is student's portfolio. It may represent instruments that reflect students' activity during placement and also a mean to document learning [1]. These are the most common assumption for students' portfolio. But there may be some other uses.

A student portfolio may represent a unique instrument that allows communication among all parties involved. It may include formal documents that need to be known by

the tutor from the enterprise such as curricula and syllabus, number of ECTS, numbers of hours required for placement, the written and signed agreement, the rights and obligations of the persons involved. There must be included also identification information of each person that is designated as responsible for the placement. At the beginning of the portfolio an evidence of the preparation stage may also be included with a schedule of the placement period. The objective of the placement should be clearly noted in order to enhance the awareness and commitment of the persons involved. Especially students need to understand the main goals that they have to pursue during placement. These kind of documents are usually considered administrative business and are overlooked or not acknowledged enough, but their contribution to the quality of placement has been underlined recently [18], [19].

A second part of the portfolio includes daily entries made by the student where he/she presents his/her activity and comments on competencies that have been used or formed. Many experts mentioned the importance of reflecting thinking as a component of portfolio [6], [10-12]. It is recommended that students use the portfolio as self-development instruments, the content aiming not only to prove the activity that was done, but also the implication that activity has on his/ her professional training. One way to assure involvement in personal growth is to ask students to formulate their own objectives, to include examples about actions they took in order to fulfil their objectives and to explore the opportunities they had.

Another way that serves self-reflecting thinking is answering questionnaires or writing feedback for the company or for the university about the period of practice. The feedback has multiple functions: it permits adjustment and improvements in enterprises' offer, measures the efficacy of

university-enterprise collaboration and also mirrors the gains obtained by the students. The feedback (as questionnaire or other type of sheet) can also be part of the portfolio.

Other document that is recommended to be included in the portfolio is tutor's evaluation. The most informative kind of evaluation includes a combination of the observation upon student's activities during monitoring phase of the placement, and an assessment of students' transversal competencies both quantitative and qualitative. The tutor may summarise his observation, may offer recommendation and may propose a grade for the entire period. His appraisal is usually part of the final evaluation along with assessment of the content of the student's activity and his/ her ability to present it in front of the university staff that is responsible for placements.

The recognition and accreditation of the placement is sometimes difficult because there are differences among places offered for internships. The supervision on student's activity is not always efficient (there are physical distances, cultural differences, or incompatibilities between place of work and learning goals) [4], [6]. Concerning the final evaluation of the portfolio there is no a customary approach, each university and each study program being able to choose its own system. When placement is compulsory there is always an internal recognition, but there are cases when this recognition is doubled by external accreditation offered by professional agencies or organisations.

The above consideration aim to recommend an enriched method of using students' portfolio: a way to track not only students' activity but also the legal frame that legislate the internship, the communication between the partners involved and the feedback offered by the stake holders. And most important it represents a tool that secure development and quality in higher education.

4. Conclusion

Tertiary education is organised in different manner across countries, but there are common features concerned to quality of learning, students training, corespondence between academic offers and labour market needs. In order to capitalise progress in professional training, starting from university, students' portfolio is a key component. The portfolio may represent a tool that facilitate learning for students, partnership and collaboration for university and enterprises and a management strategy to enter on labour market.

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