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What works with work placements?

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Abstract

What works with work placements?

There is political and societal pressure for a clearer connection between academic studies and the working life that students are to take part in. Work placements are often seen as part of the suggested solution to the perceived or actual lack of relevance in higher education. This is also the case in the Norwegian context. In this paper, we firstly want to identify which issues challenge the quality of placements. Secondly, we will present some promising ways of overcoming these challenges. This paper is based on a more wide-ranging project on work placements in Norwegian higher education.

What works with work placements?

The relevance of higher education for society and the labour market has been high on the agenda for some time now (Billett, Cain & Le 2018; Hole et al. 2018). There is political and societal pressure for a clearer connection between academic studies and the working life that students are to take part in. Work placements¹ are often seen as part of the suggested solution to the perceived or actual lack of relevance. This is also the case in the Norwegian context, even though study programmes with a long tradition for work placements encounter a considerable number of challenges when it comes to the quality of placements (Kårstein & Caspersen 2014 on health and welfare programmes; Lillejord & Børte 2017 for teacher education; [reports from NOKUT's project](#) [see below]).

An intriguing observation in a number of placement related settings is what appears to be a paradox. While students report on a number of troublesome issues, which have consequences for their learning and satisfaction during the placement, they are also among the most active supporters pushing for an increase of work placements as a part of their study programmes (Hegerstrøm 2018; The National Union of Students in Norway 2016). Another example is how HEIs promote the placements as a much-valued learning activity and at the same time seem to disregard this value when placements are not rewarded with credits (ECTS), or when placement periods collide with other learning activities in the study programme. (Hegerstrøm 2018; Hegerstrøm 2019)

What are the benefits of placements? According to research, placements have positive effects on student learning by contributing to the development of generic² and professional skills. The experiences from placements enhance personal development, confidence, and contribute to developing professional maturity. Moreover, placements prepare students for the labour market, when the student's theoretical knowledge interacts with authentic working life challenges. This can also increase the student's awareness of the relevance of theoretical knowledge and increase motivation in his/her studies (Billett, Cain & Le 2018; Fetscher, Kantardjiev & Skeidsvoll 2019).

The point of departure for this paper is as follows: We know that the quality of work placements in many cases is not sufficient and that achieving high quality work placements is difficult, but at the same time HEIs, students and other relevant stakeholders are proposing more of the same. In this paper, we examine a host of challenges to the current system of work placements in higher education, as well as some promising ways of resolving these challenges. At the same time, we need to keep in mind that what may work well in one context, may not work equally well in another. Thus, we refer to Damşa et al. (2015:62-3) suggesting that “quality is perhaps more about being conscious of for which purposes and under what conditions different pedagogical approaches are productive.”

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. We will first outline the method and limitations of the paper, and provide a definition of work placements based on our understanding of the concept in this paper. The next section presents some of the main challenges related to placements, which we detected in the scope of our project. The following part provides a selection of our findings of “what works” in order to assure and improve the quality of placements. Finally, key aspects are summed up in the concluding remarks.

¹ In this paper, the term ‘work placement’ refers to a learning activity which is integrated in the course of a study programme in higher education, lasts for a limited period, and which students for instance spend in schools, hospitals, or companies. See a more detailed delimitation of the term on the next page.

² Generic skills are, for instance, communication, problem solving, critical thinking, increased independence and self-management.

Method and limitations

This paper is based on a more wide-ranging project on work placements in Norwegian higher education, conducted by NOKUT, the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (see <https://www.nokut.no/operasjon-praksis-2018-2020> [in Norwegian]). Most of the material for this paper is derived from five of the reports generated by the project, which are listed here. Yet, we also draw on the other project reports and other relevant literature.

- A summary of what research, reports and evaluations say about quality in work placements (Fetscher, Kantardjiev & Skeidsvoll 2019 and the research literature, which the summary draws upon)
- A summary of what NOKUT's experts have said about quality in work placements as shown in the experts' accreditation and supervision reports (Lid, Stolinski & Kvernenes 2019)
- An analysis of a qualitative survey for teachers at HEIs on work placements (Hegerstrøm 2019)
- A case study of study programmes with high student satisfaction with work placements (Helseth, Fetscher & Wiggen 2019)
- A forthcoming summary of all of the project reports (Helseth et al. forthcoming)

While the research summarized in Fetscher, Kantardjiev & Skeidsvoll (2019) is international, most of the material this paper refers to, relates to the Norwegian context. Nevertheless, we believe the issues at stake and findings in this presentation are relevant in an international context.

What is a work placement in higher education, and how do we define it? We detected a multitude of terms when reviewing international research literature, which often lack a clear definition.³ When mapping work placements at Norwegian HEIs, we found that the organisation, contents and objectives of placements vary, depending on the subject area in which they are integrated, and whether they are related to profession-oriented studies, such as teacher and nurse education, and more traditional academic studies, such as history and political science. We came across broader definitions, which include campus-based learning activities that are related to working life, such as case studies or visiting a business where the student is mostly passive. Other definitions are narrower, referring to a work placement as a supervised, at times regulated, learning activity taking place off-campus, in a business, a school, a hospital or the like. Obviously, there is a myriad of possible definitions. Discussing the concept within our project (see Helseth et al. forthcoming), we decided that the following key premises should be provided in order to be considered as a work placement in our project.

- The learning activity has to contribute to students achieving the learning outcomes of the study programme (“constructive alignment”).
- The learning activity has to be planned and integrated in the required 1500-1800 hours of study per academic year.
- The learning activity has to be supervised.

When it comes to what separates work placements from “ordinary work”, many informants in our project emphasised the importance of reflection and learning in work placements (see also Helseth

³ Commonly applied terms in English language literature are practicum, practice, practice-based experiences integrated in higher education curriculum, work-integrated learning, work-based learning, workplace learning, work placement, placement, sandwich placement, sandwich courses, internship and apprenticeship. The translation of the Norwegian term we applied in our project, “praksis” (practice), is too ambiguous in English. When provided, the definitions of the terms ‘internship’, ‘apprenticeship’ and ‘sandwich courses’ appear to be more restricted to a specific kind of organisation, for instance lasting for at least 6-12 months or being placed prior to the final semester before graduation. Eventually, we made a rather pragmatic choice to apply a term that lacks such connotations, which seems to apply for “work placement/placement”.

et al. forthcoming).

Most of the material from our project is related to a narrow definition of the term, referring to a learning activity where students spend a limited period in a business, a school, a hospital or the like. This seems to be the most common understanding of the term and/or what is most frequently applied in and beyond Norwegian higher education. Hence, this is what we will refer to in the remaining part of the paper.

What are the challenges?

We believe that a necessary starting point for exploring what works well, is to present some of the challenges that need to be resolved and some possible explanations of their origins.

Our project, and other research literature, have identified a number of challenges regarding the quality of work placement in higher education (Eraut 2010; Billett 2009; Kårstein & Caspersen 2014; Lillejord & Børte 2017). These challenges vary considerably and include issues such as poor follow-up, supervision and assessment of students in work placements, lack of integration of “theory” and “practice”⁴, and more.

The report (Hegerstrøm 2018) that kick-started our project is based on a large number of written student comments about work placements, which were part of the annual Norwegian student survey, [Studiebarometeret](#). The comments indicate that the quality of work placements varies considerably across disciplines and programmes, but also within the very same disciplines and programmes. Furthermore, the students’ comments suggest that they consider positive experiences and good learning outcomes from placements as highly coincidental, comparing the chances of ending up with positive experiences to “winning the lottery.” Examples of issues reported by students are increased expenses,⁵ poor supervision, high workload, and conflicting schedules (for instance teaching or exams are scheduled at the same time as work placements). Students, other stakeholders involved in placements, and research literature point to several factors that may explain such issues. We will outline some of the challenges we have so far identified in our project.

One common issue is a lack of holistic reflection concerning the rationale for work placements and the intended learning outcomes on the part of HEIs (involving all levels of HEIs, ranging from the management to the study programme), placement hosts, politicians and others. This is particularly the case for academically-oriented study programmes, where placements often have been introduced more recently. This development is partly related to the above-mentioned political and societal focus on increasing work relevance in higher education. Consequently, there is a risk that work placements are introduced as a “quick fix” in order to increase work relevance without a proper integration with the rest of the curriculum. As safeguarding and developing the quality of work placements is challenging and resource-demanding, work placements appear as a less suitable quick fix.

Further issues are financial and time constraints on the part of HEIs and work placement hosts, as well as issues related to the regulatory framework.⁶ In particular, study programmes with compulsory, regulated placements and high student numbers struggle with recruiting and

⁴ By integration of theory and practice, we refer to processes related to the knowledge transfer between the learning arenas at the HEI and the work placement.

⁵ Attending a public university or university college is free of charge in Norway and most students attend public HEIs (higher education institution). At times, this fundamental principle appears to be challenged by travel expenses, a second apartment at the location of the work placement, etc. (Hegerstrøm 2018).

⁶ In Norway, national frameworks regulate a number of study programmes, for instance teacher education and nurse education. Such frameworks include regulations concerning work placements, which for instance regulate the number of placement periods, the amount of days, guidelines for agreements between the HEI and the placement host, etc.

maintaining a sufficient number of placements. Thus, HEIs sometimes find themselves in a position where they cannot put high demands on the quality of these placements, and instead prioritise quantity. Moreover, staff at HEIs report management pressure to cut time and costs related to the follow-up of students before, during, and after placements.⁷ Consequently, students and work placement hosts experience a lack of on-site follow-up by academic staff, which is considered to have a significant impact on the quality of the placements. Similarly, financial limitations oftentimes lead to placement hosts being unable to provide sufficient time for their employees to supervise students and/or to take part in supervision training. Especially health and social care programmes have repeatedly argued that increased funding and changes to the regulatory framework are necessary in order for the programmes to be able to meet the demand for work placements (Kristiansen & Wiggen 2019; Kantardjiev, Kristiansen & Wiggen 2019; Hegerstrøm 2019; Hegerstrøm 2018; Universities Norway 2016).

A comprehensive topic repeatedly addressed by students, but also by other stakeholders, is the poor quality of cooperation, communication and mutual understanding between HEIs and the placement hosts, or labour market in general (Hegerstrøm 2018). Different objectives, priorities, and a lack of communication between academia on the one hand and the work placement hosts on the other, can create tensions between the involved actors (Billett 2009). Cooperation and communication are also hampered by a lack of knowledge about the other learning arena, its traditions and approaches, which has led to statements such as “we don’t speak the same language.” Some perceive this as an increased “academisation” and a gap between the professional and academic learning arenas, which hinder communication, cooperation, and knowledge transfer (cf. Aarstad et al. 2019; Helseth, Fetscher & Wiggen 2019; Helseth et al. forthcoming). A related issue is a lack of ownership or sense of responsibility to safeguard the knowledge transfer between the learning arenas. The relevance of such ownership becomes more apparent when looking into a study that points to the process of “contested learning”. Contested learning can result from lacking cooperation and communication between the learning arenas and thereby failing to arrange for integrating student learning from the placement in on-campus teaching (Schaafsma in Jones, Green & Higson 2017).

The great variation of quality, as reported by students in Hegerstrøm (2018) and others, calls for attention to the quality assurance of work placements. However, HEIs, being responsible for quality assurance according to the Norwegian Act relating to Universities and University Colleges, have limited influence on and control over all elements of placements. This diminishes the extent of quality assurance of placements. For instance, some study programmes that offer placements have little or no control regarding how much and what kind of supervision a student receives in the placement setting (Hegerstrøm 2019).

These different issues can have wide-ranging consequences for matters such as preparation for placements, follow-up and supervision during placements, assessment of students, and the integration of theoretical knowledge and working life-related skills. So, in light of these challenges and their possible origins, what can be done to address and resolve them? What works?

⁷ This especially affects HEI staff’s travels to meet the students and supervisors on site.

What works?

In this section, we will provide a selection of our findings, primarily from the Norwegian context. The scope of this paper does not allow us to look into all aspects that affect the quality and relevance of work placement. Thus, we have chosen three topics that we find to be among the most important for the quality of work placements:

- Communication, cooperation and integration
- Preparation and organization of placements
- Quality assurance

Communication, cooperation and integration

As outlined above, key challenges for safeguarding the quality of placements relate to communication, cooperation and integration. These elements are among the issues that students consider least satisfactory in the student survey responses on work placements (Wiggen 2019; Hegerstrøm 2018). At the same time, research emphasises that communication and cooperation are essential for improving the quality of work placements (Raaen 2017). How can communication, cooperation and integration contribute to safeguard the quality of work placements?

To start with, HEIs and placement hosts often lack common arenas for interaction. Thus, establishing such arenas can be a useful first step towards improving communication, cooperation and integration. NOKUT's auditing experts found that R&D cooperation is a common denominator among study programmes that have established well-working cooperation with providers of work placements. In these cases, R&D is used as a forum for communication, which safeguards the flow of relevant information, contributes to the quality assurance and the development of the working relevance of the study programmes (Lid, Stolinski & Kvernenes 2019). Similarly, seminars for placement supervisors, students and HEI staff fulfil the task of establishing arenas for cooperation and communication, which also contribute to an increased integration of theory and practice (Helseth, Fetscher & Wiggen 2019).

The use of dual positions⁸ represents another tool that can increase mutual understanding and have a positive impact on other aspects linked to placements in both learning arenas. The experience and knowledge obtained in such positions can for example contribute to improving the contents of agreements between HEIs and the host, which can positively influence criteria for supervision, learning objectives, etc. Moreover, dual positions represent an attractive opportunity for employees in the placement setting, who are interested in combining their professional with an academic career. Not least, dual positions can increase the sought-after work relevance of HEIs' study programmes (Helseth et al. forthcoming).

A model emphasised in research (Nguyen in Raaen 2017) and by our informants, which contributes to improved communication and increased integration, is tripartite collaboration between the student, HEI staff and placement host. Three aspects are significant in order to achieve a well-functioning tripartite collaboration. First, shared understanding of the student's learning outcome is essential, which can be enhanced by the student, HEI and placement host jointly developing the learning outcomes (Helseth, Fetscher & Wiggen 2019). Second, planning the implementation of the placement is important, including supervision and criteria for supervision, as well as procedures for evaluating the placement period. A third element is the significance of mutual acknowledgement of one another's different viewpoints and focusing on the fact that not only the student, but all three parties gain knowledge during the process. The exchange of knowledge thereby takes place through

⁸ 'Dual position' here refers to a person employed outside of academia additionally holding a part-time position at the HEI, or vice versa.

meaningful and coherent coordination and integration of theory and practice (Raaen 2017).

The significance of the supervisor and the organisation of the supervision is highlighted both in research literature, and by HEIs and students we used as informants in our project. Supervision can, for instance, enhance the student's confidence and professional development. Moreover, supervision can generate an increased integration of theory and practice. This requires that the supervisors have the appropriate competence and experience (Jayasekaras 2018; Järvinen, Eklöf & Salminen 2018; Lid, Stolinski & Kvernenes 2019).

Moreover, the individual HEI staff members responsible for work placements can have a positive influence on the quality of communication, cooperation and integration. Examples from our reports indicate that such individuals have a number of characteristics in common. They appear highly committed to tasks related to work placements; they possess professional experience in, and are familiar with, the field of the respective placements, which improves the dialogue. Additionally, continuity regarding the individuals in charge of placements at the HEIs and the placement host can be advantageous for safeguarding the quality of cooperation (Helseth, Fetscher & Wiggen 2019).

Preparation and organization of placements

This section provides an overview of how preparation and organisation of placements can affect the learning outcome. Similarly, to the previous topic, tasks related to preparation and organisation involve actors from beyond campus and depend on their input.

Research emphasises the importance of appropriate organisation, which includes aligning and integrating placements with the learning outcomes, exams etc. (Jones, Green & Higson 2017). The students' learning outcome is influenced by how different placement-related variables are organised and connected.

[I]t makes good conceptual sense to posit that good curricula design (IPP [induction/introduction and preparation process], supervisor access and alignment), in addition to authentic workplace experiences, may influence good learning outcomes and ultimately student satisfaction with their WIL⁹ experience (both at a university and work level). (Smith & Worsford 2014: 1082)

The diversity of programmes that offer work placements, their contents and objectives require a variety of placement models.¹⁰ Therefore, suggesting one ideal model for organising placements appears unreasonable. Yet, NOKUT's auditing reports of different study programs and institutions (Lid, Stolinski & Kvernenes 2019) indicate what kind of organisation can enhance the quality of placements.

For instance, assessments by auditing experts (ibid) show that placements should be of a sufficient duration in order for students to obtain necessary training and carry out independent work. Furthermore, the auditing experts recommend dividing placements in two or more periods, because students benefit from obtaining experience from different settings. Additionally, a higher number of placement periods ensures repetition and learning. This should preferably be combined with organising the placement periods and their contents in a way that contributes to the student's progression. Furthermore, short placements that last one day or a week are not considered effective for providing sufficient learning outcome due to the amount of resources necessary for organising them.¹¹

However, constraints such as financial issues, framework plans, and a lack of placements may limit

⁹ Work integrated learning.

¹⁰ An overview of different work placement models, varying in duration and amount of periods, is provided in Brandt cited in Hegerström (2018: 15ff), both Norwegian-language.

¹¹ We may note that short placements are a contested issue in teacher education programmes, which often include one-day-placements (Bråten & Kantardjiev forthcoming; Lillejord & Børte 2014).

the potential number and length of placement periods. This means that study programmes should focus on the organisation of placements in order to provide optimal conditions for students to achieve the best possible learning outcome within the limitations that they encounter (Lid, Stolinski & Kvernenes 2019; Helseth et al. forthcoming; Kantardjiev, Wiggen & Kristiansen 2019; Fetscher, Kantardjiev & Skeidsvoll 2019).

Moreover, auditing reports recommend avoiding setting up placements too early in the course of study, in order to allow students to gain relevant knowledge and sufficiently prepare them for the placement. For instance, students of childcare education at a Norwegian HEI is an example of how placements in the beginning of studies can nonetheless result in a positive learning experience. The programme's students are provided with relevant theoretical and practical information in the weeks prior to the placement. The students also have the opportunity to obtain first-hand knowledge by meeting senior students as well as placement supervisors (Lid, Stolinski & Kvernenes 2019; Helseth, Fetscher & Wiggen 2019).

According to academic staff, certain organisational approaches can enhance the integration of theory and practice and ensure the knowledge transfer. One approach is organising students in so-called "reflection-groups", preferably in due time prior to the placement. Such groups work as arenas for preparation, exchanging experience and reflection (Helseth, Fetscher & Wiggen 2019). In order to follow-up the individual student's experience sufficiently, the groups should not include too many students. Alternatively, memos/notes, case studies, and dialogue-based teaching can be applied as a means for reflection, enhancing the integration of theory and practice, etc. (Hegerstrøm 2019).

Quality assurance

The scope of the paper does not allow discussing all aspects related to the topic of quality assurance, therefore we here focus on how universities and university colleges apply means for internal quality assurance. Quality assurance of work placements is difficult and complex. Much of what should be assured takes place outside campus, which can obstruct quality assurance of placements. Nonetheless, effective quality assurance measures should decrease what students and other stakeholders experience as considerable variations in the quality of placements.

Three main aspects related to quality assurance stand out from the material for this paper. The first one concerns the elements of the quality assurance and its sources and actors. Quality assurance of work placements should concern all matters that influence student learning, such as those mentioned previously in this paper. Especially smaller institutions with specialised programmes are successful in this regard, according to the reviewed auditing reports. Such institutions stand out positively due to their close dialogue and cooperation with all stakeholders. It is underlined that this cooperation extends beyond exclusively placement-related matters, and for instance includes the placement host's participation in the HEI's R&D forum or the HEI attending meetings at the municipality level (Lid, Stolinski & Kvernenes 2019).

Secondly, HEIs should to a greater extent include evaluations from other relevant actors involved in placements, and not rely solely on student evaluations. Feedback from supervisors/work placement hosts, teachers in charge of placement supervision and candidates/alumni can provide a more holistic picture (Lid, Stolinski & Kvernenes 2019; Wiggen, Kristiansen & Stolinski forthcoming). The experts assigned by NOKUT to evaluate quality assurance systems find that communication and gathering information from the labour market should be used more strategically to assure the quality of placements, but also as a knowledge base for assessments of the quality and relevance of the study programmes (Lid, Stolinski & Kvernenes 2019).

Third, differences among the various study programmes and the respective work placements often

necessitate different methods of quality assurance. For instance, some institutions separate the quality assurance measures/process for placements from the respective programmes or courses. In contrast, others include placements in the quality assurance at the course level. Larger institutions with a large proportion of profession-oriented programmes tend to choose the first alternative, while HEIs with less profession-oriented programmes tend to include quality assurance measures at course level. Both approaches can be effective (Lid, Stolinski & Kvernenes 2019). However, when placements are included in the quality assurance of courses, there is a risk that the results are not sufficiently registered in the succeeding reports, which are submitted to the HEI management. Being oblivious of possible issues, the management can thus fail to prioritise quality assurance of placements (Lid, Stolinski & Kvernenes 2019).

We may lastly add, that auditing experts emphasise that quality assurance needs to be fit for purpose, rather than applying one generic model to all programmes (Standards and Guidelines for the Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, ENQA 2015; Lid, Stolinski & Kvernenes 2019). This also applies to the quality assurance of work placements.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, we have presented a selection of findings from our project. The findings are largely based on information from Norwegian stakeholders, but we believe that they are relevant for other national contexts as well. Our intention has not been to provide a manual, but to provide insights into the multi-faceted challenges linked to work placements and outline possible solutions. At this point, we summarize key elements we identified above, which can contribute to the improvement of the quality and relevance of placements.

Communication, cooperation and integration:

- Establish arenas for interaction, for example through R&D collaboration and/or seminars for supervisors.
- Enable a tripartite collaboration that includes students. An area for such collaboration is, for example, the development of learning outcomes for placements.
- The introduction of dual positions can improve mutual understanding between the learning arenas.
- Supervision plays a key role in improving the quality of placements, which requires the supervisor's appropriate competence, experience and time.
- Recruiting dedicated individuals with experience and knowledge related to both learning arenas for key positions in organising placements.

Preparation and organisation of placements:

- The duration of the placement should be long enough to allow the student to obtain relevant learning and experience.
- Work placements should preferably be divided into at least two periods and be organised in a way that facilitates the students' progression.
- Placements should not be placed too early in the course of study and should be preceded by appropriate preparations, for instance providing students with necessary information and knowledge, and arranging seminars for students and placement hosts/supervisors to meet etc.
- Introduce means which promote the students' reflection and exchange of experiences, for instance by organising students in reflection-groups.

Quality assurance:

- Quality assurance measures concern all elements that influence student learning related to placements.

- Information from different actors involved, not only students, should be gathered and analysed.
- Results from quality assurance measures are used as a knowledge base for further actions.
- These results should be made available and visible for the HEI management so that quality of placements is paid attention to and prioritised.

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