

Founding Supporter Fund Impact Report University of Suffolk Student Placement Scheme 2017

Purpose of the scheme

The purpose of the scheme was to empower the students to help them improve their employability by gaining experience and offering an opportunity to reflect on their experience. It was aimed at students who have had limited opportunities, or limited experience perhaps due to disabilities. The successful students were given paid challenging employment opportunities which would help them to develop the skills they need to compete for jobs.

How funding was spent

The funds given by the Foundation Board were used to pay the wages for the successful placement students and to produce a two page flyer to promote the scheme to students (see image below.)



Fig.1: Student Placement two page booklet (front page)

Impact and outcomes

Promotional material raised awareness of the Foundation Board funded scheme and the support available to all students in preparing for their future. In total fourteen students applied for the scheme, all were offered an interview. Many of the applicants believed their lack of confidence was hindering them. The unsuccessful applicants were offered one-to-one feedback on their CV and their interview. The three students that were employed gave the most evidence in interview on how they would benefit from the scheme. In interview one of the successful applicants said "I like to work in the shadows but I'm trying not to be like this".

The students stated a number of reasons they believed they lacked confidence: English being their second language; little work experience; autism; a struggle to sell their skills and abilities; and a loss of confidence since coming to the UK as an asylum seeker and unable to gain jobs.

As a mentor for the three students I asked myself how can I develop this student this week as each student was very different, and I wanted to challenge, stretch and develop them as individuals.

Student tasks introduced to stretch them included:

- A phone call to an external agency. The student had to ask questions and to keep the conversation flowing, but for this student it was a massive challenge because they are on the autistic spectrum.
- Welcome employers and students at the University of Suffolk Careers Fairs, at the beginning of the day the student was nervous and used closed body language. As the day went on the student became more relaxed and used open body language and smiled.
- Talking as part of a group to other members of the team giving their thoughts and opinions.
- Completing a presentation at the end of their placement.
- Working on the Safeguarding pages of MySuffolk, completing research and then updating the webpages using Drupal, our web Content Management System.

At all stages of the placement the students were able to talk to me as their mentor about their concerns. I monitored and evaluated them weekly to support and guide them and to ease any concerns they may have. Students were given the opportunity to reflect and give feedback on how they believed they are doing, and to attend staff training courses such as Conflict Resolution Training and Working with Drupal Content Management System was offered. Students were also offered the opportunity to work-shadow other departments such as the Infozone.

During the placement, the students were given support and the opportunity to search for graduate jobs, and to work on their CVs and their LinkedIn profiles to identify further opportunities. This gave them knowledge of the community, and the experience to research organisations and sectors that may suit their skills and what they have achieved.

At the beginning of the placement all the students were asked, 'How confident are you in your ability to influence your future career goals?' Their responses were:

- "Not sure about my confidence 50-50, I haven't entered the world of work yet and I feel I'm still learning and in transition with my group" (there was no eye contact).
- "Less than 50%" (they looked at the floor as they answered).
- "I understand what things I need to improve my communication skills which I think are at a medium level now" (cried in their interview).

Student comments on their placement

The students were given an exit interview towards the end of the programme to help them reflect on their achievements. Below are some of the comments they made:

- I feel the experience has led me to realise that everything is possible.
- I consider that I have become more open and perceptive to working in a group compared to before the placement.
- My confidence has grown compared to what it used to be.
- What I enjoyed most was learning how to communicate with people.
- I felt I had a lot of help from staff to help me to have more confidence.
- During the placement, I felt in real contact with the work environment. I worked in real projects, solving challenging situations, but with the advantages of flexibility.
- I had one hundred percent support. Especially from my mentor, who understood my personal limitations and encouraged me to give my best during my time doing my placement.
- I definitely gained in confidence and the development of my verbal communication skills.



Fig. 2: Two of the placement students

Considerations for the future:

Bid to the Foundation Board for further funding to continue the scheme and if successful:

- To develop the scheme by acting on feedback by the students.

- Increased provision for students to work shadow with other departments.
- Consider opening to other departments and to external employers to increase opportunities.
- Improved awareness among academics on the various benefits of the placement, and their role in encouraging students to take the opportunity to go on the placement.

To continue these placements could benefit the University of Suffolk in increasing the attractiveness of the institution to prospective students, who are increasingly mindful of the cost of their degree and the value of a placement to improve their opportunities.

What next for the students

Erika is taking part in the Erasmus programme, a European Union programme for education and training, and she will be leaving the UK to live in Flensburg in Germany for approximately one year. Taking part in Erasmus will continue to develop her skills to improve her employability, and she should acquire new life skills and develop her confidence even further.

Junior has started applying for jobs in the games design industry; his dream job is to create 3D character models. He has applied for jobs across the country; his goal has always been to work for Rockstar Games, one of the biggest video game publishers best known for their Grand Theft Auto, Red Dead, Midnight Club, Max Payne, and Manhunt series of video games. The day after he finished his placement with us he heard he had an interview with them. To keep his options open he has applied to local organisations that also design, develop, illustrate and animate games. When I first met Junior he believed all he was capable of was stacking shelves, he now has the confidence to apply for graduate jobs.

Margaret is applying for graduate jobs and to keep her options open she has also applied for a Masters at UEA, and is currently writing a 1000 word essay as part of the UEA admissions process.

An unexpected outcome for me was how much the students actually achieved on the placement and how they became more confident in themselves.

To conclude the placements gave the students the opportunity to gain new skills and expand the ones they already had allowing them to make better informed decisions about their future career choices. The scheme helped to increase their confidence in their employability, something evidenced by speaking to the students during and at the end of the placement, and speaking to members of the Student Services team. A further valuable output for students from undertaking this scheme is the ability to effectively evidence their placement experience on their CV and to provide useful examples to use in competency based job applications or interviews.