



The Scholarship
of Engagement
for Politics

**The Scholarship of Engagement for Politics
FDTL 5
Final Evaluation Report**

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Executive Summary

This FDTL project's purpose was to identify, develop, evaluate and promote the scholarship of engagement, in terms of placement learning activities, as a formal dimension of the Politics and International Relations curriculum. The aim was to offer alternative models of the scholarship of engagement for enhancing student learning and demonstrate how these could be embedded in the student experience.

Rethinking placement learning

The Scholarship of Engagement for Politics developed a new approach to placement learning: our placements were relatively short (5 to 16 days), embedded in the curriculum (through integration into modules), and were research-based (students undertook research projects for their placement providers as well as researching politics in action from a participant's perspective). Besides the benefits in enhancing students' research skills and enriching their understanding of politics, our approach enables part-time students or students with part-time jobs or other commitments to engage in placement activities. The project also made extensive use of web-based technologies, including blogs for students to record their activities and a dedicated online platform to support stakeholders and to disseminate the project's resources.

Project Activities

The project undertook a nationwide survey of Politics and International Relations departments regarding placement opportunities for students, which discovered that 31 out of 96 departments make some use of placement learning, but three quarters of these departments employ placements of at least 10 weeks. In terms of setting up the placements: the three universities involved in the project amended certain module specifications to incorporate an element of placement learning; eligible students were recruited through a formal application process and were briefed about what to expect; and placement opportunities were identified and negotiated with a variety of political actors, including MPs and MEPs, local and regional government bodies, NGOs and voluntary organisations. We developed partnership agreements and health and safety documentation. The main forms of data collected by the project were the students' blogs, post-placement interviews, coursework, and a follow-up questionnaire administered six months after each placement. We also canvassed placement providers about their experiences.

The Project's Findings

Placements made an important contribution to students' understanding of politics, by complementing their class-based studies. We found that assessment regimes can have a significant impact on the nature and success of placements, with certain forms of assessment imparting a focus and a purpose to placement activities. There were also unexpected benefits in terms of employability, as placements gave students a sense of future career possibilities and enhanced their research skills.

The Future

The project has had a profound impact on the teaching and learning strategies of the universities involved in the project, which have brought into play a variety of ways of making the process of organising and management of placements sustainable beyond the life of the project.

Rethinking Placement Learning

This FDTL project's purpose was to identify, develop, evaluate and promote the scholarship of engagement, conceived of as a form of placement learning, as a formal dimension of the Politics and International Relations curriculum in UK universities. The aim was to offer alternative models of the scholarship of engagement for enhancing student learning and demonstrate how these could be embedded in the student experience and transferred to cognate disciplines.

The potential and limitations of placement learning

Placement learning can be a very powerful pedagogical tool. It offers students real world examples of the subject matter of their courses; on placements they may both observe how events play out in practice as well as apply the theories and concepts of their courses to everyday situations. In short, it holds out the potential to enrich and complement classroom study. It also contributes to the personal development of students and improves their experience of university. Finally, placement learning is potentially a very effective means of addressing the employability agenda, which has become in recent years a key concern of both government and industry.¹ It is not surprising that placement activity has become a popular and often central component of degree courses across the UK and the world more generally, whether in the form of internships, work-based learning, or service-learning.

However, placement learning also runs up against a number of constraints. With the introduction of substantial course fees, on top of general student living expenses, placements often become luxuries that many students cannot afford – the part-time jobs they take on to get by often makes it difficult for them to take advantage of any placement opportunities that are on offer, and the difficulties are compounded for students with dependent families and from so-called 'non-traditional' backgrounds. As a consequence placement activities, whether curricular, co-curricular or extracurricular, often run in the summer vacation, which frequently means that placement activities lose much of their connection to and ability to inform the students' studies. From discussions with colleagues in other departments, we discovered that some had problems filling the number of placement opportunities available and many noted a dip in the popularity of placement modules. A colleague responsible for placements on the BA Graphic Design at Coventry University told us that most of her students would prefer to undertake a simulated project on campus rather than engage in a real-world activity because of the latter's propensity to clash with part-time jobs and the costs of travelling to and from the placement provider.

These financial and academic considerations are also a factor with sandwich degree courses: racking up an additional year of student loans and deferring entering the workforce will discourage students without significant parental financial backing; and the connection between the year of work experience – and it is usually thought of in

¹ Although not a central concern of this project, many supporters of placement activity stress its potential to foster political engagement, through connecting students with the community surrounding their universities, making graduates better and more active citizens (e.g., Annette 2005).

these terms on sandwich degree courses – and the students’ degree courses is often reduced to how lucky students are in finding relevant placements; some will, but many won’t, and the third year out in the world beyond the university is frequently reduced to work experience, with the focus predominantly on the benefits in terms of employability.

The most popular practice in locating and setting up placement activities is for students to find and negotiate their own placement-learning opportunities. While they are frequently assisted in this endeavour by the placement offices and/or careers services at their universities, there is a danger of wide disparities in the learning opportunities afforded by the experiences. The benefit of this approach in terms of reduced staffing costs and time spent on setting up placements comes at the risk that placements may become disconnected from the academic content of courses. Once again, the benefits of placement activity, very real and important as they no doubt are, become reduced to predominantly enhancing employability.

Finally, placement activity which is not part of a sandwich degree course generally takes place in the final year of degree courses, which limits the extent to which the students’ experiences can inform their further studies. While students may be able to put their knowledge into practice during their placements, the possibility that placements may inform studies is effectively denied; this is especially the case if we consider that a time lag may be necessary for students to reflect upon and assimilate the real-world knowledge gained on their placements.

Surveying the field: placement learning in Politics courses

To date there have been a number of very successful initiatives introducing placement learning into the Politics and International Relations curriculum. Of particular note is the University of Hull’s BA in British Politics and Legislative Studies (Norton 2004, 2006, 2007) and the Politics and Parliamentary Studies programme at University of Leeds, which include a one-year placement, usually with an MP in the Palace of Westminster. While such programmes offer wonderful learning and employment-enhancing experiences, they tend to be exclusive in the double sense noted above: the courses are capped and so select the students to be admitted in terms of academic ability; and many students may be put off by the expense of adding a fourth year to their undergraduate studies, and a year in one of the most expensive cities in the world at that! These programmes are also exclusive in the sense that they define politics purely in terms of the activities of national legislatures in capital cities, whereas the undergraduate Politics curriculum has expanded over the past few decades to include the study of local, regional and non-state actors and to address broader issues of governance that don’t comfortably sit on the traditional plane of political activity.

The University of Greenwich has attempted to address some of these limitations through its ‘day release’ model, where students go on placements with MPs and other political actors one day a week across the academic year and where their placements are accessed through a level-three placement module. While this goes a long way in addressing issues of exclusiveness, it also introduces an element of risk for students and course managers, with the danger that placements may fail for one reason or another, making it difficult for students to acquire the necessary module credits to

graduate at the end of their final year (McLean 2004: 9, 10; cf. QAA 2007: 10, 11, 14).

At the outset of our project, we conducted a survey of all of the named Politics departments across the British Isles, using the Political Studies Association directory of departments. Of the 96 Politics departments surveyed, 31 made use of placement learning in their degree courses, which indicated that the use of placement learning has already had a fairly substantial impact on the teaching and learning of politics at British and Irish institutions of higher education. In this respect, the three partners on the project, the University of Warwick, Oxford Brookes University and Coventry University, were somewhat behind the curve – although the Department of International Studies and Social Science at Coventry University had introduced a level-two Work-Placement module, no student had yet elected to take it, and any institutional memory of the department’s use of placements in the 1970s had been effectively erased by the discontinuing of such activity long before the project team members joined the department and the retirement of the members of staff involved. The three partner department were also behind in terms of the use of placements by other departments in their own universities. For example, some degree courses in the School of Social Sciences and Law at Oxford Brookes University have long made use of placements, and a survey of Coventry University’s module directory revealed that every other subject area in the university possessed a placement-learning module of one sort or another (as Coventry doesn’t have a Philosophy department, Pure Mathematics was the only degree programme without placement opportunities).

While the fact that almost a third of Politics departments in the British Isles made some use of placement activities is a promising development, the more detailed results of our findings suggest that some of the problems and limitations with placement learning discussed above may not have been averted.

- Half of departments using placement learning send their students on year-long placements.
- Three quarters of departments require placements last ten weeks or longer.
- Four-fifths of the placements run in years three and four of degree programmes.

Hence there is prima facie evidence that the general limitations and problems with sandwich courses and extended placement activities will affect the use of this pedagogical tool in the teaching and learning of Politics and International Relations. (Further results of the survey are discussed in the Activities section below.)

Reconceptualising placement learning: short, embedded, research-based

The Scholarship of Engagement for Politics works with a reconceptualised notion of the pedagogy of placement learning in order to significantly redress, if not entirely overcome, the above problems and limitations. By contrast to the standard practice in Politics departments and universities more generally across the British Isles, we have developed an approach to placements around the following elements:

Short: Our placements ranged from five to sixteen days, scheduled in a variety of patterns, from one to three straight weeks on a full-time basis to one to two days a week across three to six weeks; but some placements were arranged on a more ad hoc basis, with the student attending certain key events and proceedings. The common element within this variety of placement schedules is that placements took place within the academic year. The vast majority of the placements were located close to the universities, enabling students to move between their place of study and the location of their placement with ease and at little cost, and establishing the potential for placement activities to inform academic studies and vice versa.

Embedded: The placements we designed and developed were embedded in a number of respects. They were embedded in the curriculum in the sense that they took place within the academic year, usually in term time; were linked to modules of study (at Coventry University and the University of Warwick these were content modules); and were assessed by the universities, with the marks awarded constituting or contributing toward the final module marks. And the students were embedded in the organisations of the placement providers. The placements were negotiated between the project team members and the placement providers and structured in terms of intended learning outcomes; they were generally constructed around specific research projects to be undertaken by the placement students. As the placements ran during the academic year, the vast majority were local to the universities. However, we received a small number of offers of placements in Brussels, which we felt we could not turn down (and which we financed out of the project budget and from other appropriate sources, such as EU Jean Monnet funds²), and most of the students placed with MPs were invited to Westminster for at least part of their placements.

Research-based: The placements developed a form of undergraduate research-based learning in a double sense: the students were both conducting a research project for their placement providers and at the same time were able to observe and participate in politics in action through involvement with the day-to-day activities of their placement providers. Every placement contained both of these elements of research, although there was some variation in the balance between the two: in some placements the research project predominated; in others, involvement in and observation of routine placement provider activities came to the fore. But in all cases our emphasis was on research. In terms of the underlying pedagogical approach set out below, the project team were keen to make a contribution to the emergence of opportunities for undergraduates to engage in research activities, to become producers instead of more passive consumers of knowledge, and to meet student demands to ‘do their own research’ (van Assendelft 2008: 94). In this respect we were very fortunate to have close links with the Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research, a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning set up between the University of Warwick and Oxford Brookes University, two of the three universities involved in the Scholarship of Engagement for Politics. Indeed, some of the project team members were closely involved with the Reinvention Centre’s activities, which were complementary and informed by the same pedagogical philosophy. But whereas the Reinvention Centre is concerned to reinvent the university as a whole in order to fully

² The European Parliament makes available funding for students to visit other EU countries as part of their studies under the Leonardo Programme, which could be also used for such purposes. We are grateful to Fiona Buckley for informing us of this means of covering the costs of travel and accommodation for placements outside the UK.

integrate undergraduates into the research process, the Scholarship of Engagement focused more closely on one pedagogical tool to make undergraduates research active – our theory of change is narrower (see the ‘report on the stakeholder’s experience of the project’ by Murray Saunders in appendix 1 of this report), but our approach obviously gels closely with the Reinvention Centre’s concepts of ‘student as producer’ and ‘teaching in public’ (The Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research 2007: 13, 15-16, 26-27, 31-32). The project also benefited immeasurably from its various friends, whose work influenced our approach significantly, such as Mike Neary, Glynis Cousin and Alan Jenkins (Neary 2006, 2007; Blackmore and Cousin 2003-4; Jenkins 2003; Jenkins et al 2003). On a more practical level, the emphasis on undergraduate research helped to impress on placement providers that we did not think of our placements as work experience, but in terms of the academic development of our students. This is important, as one practitioner of placement learning in Politics has noted his students’ ‘disappointment at the mundane nature of some of their work’ (McLean 2004: 7).³

It is important at this stage to distinguish our concept of placement-embedded research-based learning (PERBL) from work-based learning (WBL). While there are certainly some affinities between the two approaches, not least a concern with developing partnerships between universities and organisations in their surrounding communities and devising learning projects in the placement providers’ organisations (Boud, Solomon and Symes 2001: 4-7; Blackwell et al 2001; Brennan 2005; Little 2000; Portwood and Costley 2000; Reeve and Gallacher 2005), there are two key differences: with WBL ‘work is the curriculum’ (Boud, Solomon and Symes 2001: 5; Boud 2001: 45), whereas for PERBL the curriculum stays with the university and is largely unchanged in terms of its content – placements enrich the traditional curriculum rather than supplant it; and with PERBL the focus remains on learning outcomes, to be assessed in written academic coursework, whereas WBL is concerned with ‘performance outcomes’ in the workplace (Boud and Solomon 2001: 275).⁴ For these reasons, and in the above noted desire to impress on placement providers our focus on learning, we expunged all mentions of the four-letter word ‘work’ in our partnership agreements and project documentation more generally. And in terms of assessment, our model indicates that we should assess what students have learned from their placements in the context of their academic courses, not their performance on placement.⁵

³ Our approach has a number of similarities with the ‘political science research internships’ developed by the University of Western Australia, which unfortunately we did not learn about until after the completion of the project. We share the ‘contention . . . that a political science education is enhanced by experience of the policy process’ and the emphasis on engaging students on a research project for their placement providers. However, UWA internships are of eight week’s duration and form part of a dedicated final year undergraduate module rather than being embedded in the curriculum to the extent we hoped to achieve (Moon and Schokman 2000: 170, 171).

⁴ The QAA’s revised code of practice now makes a similar distinction between work-based learning and placement learning. Although the QAA’s differentiation is more muted, it is similar to ours in that WBL usually involves ‘the assessment of reflective practice’, whereas placement learning is defined as ‘learning achieved . . . outside the institution at which the . . . student is enrolled’ (QAA 2007: 4-5). The former, less discursive, code of practice referred simply to ‘placement learning’ to cover all varieties of learning outside of the awarding institution (QAA 2001).

⁵ Of course, the two things are connected. But unlike placement learning practices elsewhere (e.g., McLean 2004: 3), where the placement provider assesses the student’s performance and awards a mark that contributes to overall module result, we determined that the universities should retain complete control of assessment, because of this key distinction between learning on and from a placement on the

Rearticulating the scholarship of engagement: from the US to the UK

Our concern to inject an element of research into the undergraduate experience is inspired primarily by the report of the Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University (1998). The commission expressed a concern that US undergraduates were generally excluded from the research conducted by their teachers and proposed a number of means of redressing this problem, including the use of ‘carefully constructed internships’ which ‘can provide learning that cannot be replicated in the classroom’ (Boyer Commission 1998: 18-19). A similar concern about the lack of opportunities for students at British universities to ‘get their hands dirty’ in the research process was raised by Barbara Zamorski (2000).

Over the last two decades in the United States service-learning has become one of the most popular means of extending experiential-learning opportunities to undergraduate students, although its advocates often stress its benefits in addressing a perceived crisis in higher education in America and in developing a civic awareness in young adults.⁶ This is usually represented in terms of higher education in the US rediscovering its mission of addressing social problems and serving the nation (Boyer 1994, 1996; Barber 1998). ‘The scholarship of engagement’ was coined by Ernest Boyer (1996) to describe the connection between institutions of higher education and their surrounding communities which he hoped to foster. From a British perspective, this emphasis on the duty of universities to serve the nation appears a little alien.⁷ Therefore, we have translated the scholarship of engagement to capture the experience of individual undergraduate students learning about their subject through engaging in relevant real-world activities.⁸ Therefore our concern is with engagement in an academic sense rather than in civic or political terms (cf. Ball 2005; Colby et al 2003; Lempert 1996).

Despite this difference in national context, we can learn a number of important lessons from the service-learning literature, especially the growing body of work exploring experiential learning in Political Science.⁹ If we bracket for a moment the element of this pedagogy concerned with education for citizenship and service to the community, which often lacks direct connections to the academic content of

one hand and performing on the placement on the other. But we did canvass the views of each placement provider following every placement, to make sure that there was no disparity between what the students claimed they did on placements in their blog entries, journals, essays and reports, and what actually occurred. However, this never became an issue with any of the 36 placements run as part of the project.

⁶ The literature on service-learning is extensive. Important contributions include Astin (2002); Barber and Battistoni (1993); Eyler and Giles (1999); Jacoby and associates (1996, 2003); Rhoads and Howard (1998); Stanton, Giles and Cruz (1999); and Zlotkowski (1998).

⁷ Indeed, it would be unseemly to go as far as Barber and Battistoni (1993: 239) in their description of service-learning as part of a ‘pedagogy of freedom.’ But for an attempt to recover a lost tradition of civic purpose in British universities, see Annette (2005: 332).

⁸ Interestingly in this regard, Edward Zlotkowski (2005: ix) has recently used the phrase to refer to the service-learning activities of individual undergraduate students.

⁹ For example, see Battistoni (1997, 2000); Battistoni and Hudson (1997); Beamer (1998); Dicklitch (2003); Gorham (2005); Markus, Howard and King (1993); Rimmerman (n.d., 1997, (2005); Smith (2006); and Young (1996). For attempts to attach a service-learning element to International Relations courses, see Cabrera and Anastasi (2008); McCartney (2006); Marlin-Bennett (2002); and Patterson (2000).

classroom activities, and can often upset rather than enrich understanding (Zivi 1997: 53-55), we are left with a number of key insights which are serviceable from a British perspective. In addition to acquiring ‘factual knowledge about politics’ (Delli Carpini and Keeter 2000: 635), these include examples of: embedding experiential learning in modules, employing often very short placements during term time (Hudson 1997: 84; Markus, Howard and King 1993: 412), forming partnership arrangements with community organisations (Jacoby and associates 2003), encouraging student reflection (Mills 2001; Watters and Ford 1995), and patterns of assessment (Williams and Driscoll 1997).¹⁰

From logs to blogs: the benefits of electronic means of reflection

There is general agreement among practitioners of placement learning in two things: that it is essential to encourage students to reflect on their experiences if they are to learn from them; and that the most popular form of facilitating reflection – the reflective diary or journal – has severe limitations. While keeping a log of activities is vital in helping students record and revisit their experiences, the frequent suspicion is that many students have completed their journals not at regular intervals during the life of their placements, but in one go directly before the deadline for submission.

To address these problems with paper-based diaries and journals, we required each student to blog about their experiences. Every University of Warwick student is provided with their own personal blog on enrolment, but we were also able to create blogging facilities for Coventry University and Oxford Brookes University students on the Warwick website. We quickly discovered that not only did this more public form of recording experiences encourage students to log their reflections more frequently and at greater length than would otherwise have been the case – they were aware that their peers and tutors would be looking at their blogs to see what they had been up to; the medium also made a difference to the message in terms of the style and humour the students employed.

Blogs also allowed the project team to remote monitor the placements, which was of crucial importance with placements of such short duration (placement visits would have been difficult to arrange, as well as undesirable from the point of view of the students it transpired). We were able to register and respond to any problems as soon as the students updated their blogs.

We were also eager to exploit technology in other areas. For example, the students’ post-placement interviews with members of the project team were videotaped, clips of which have been used in our conference presentations and other dissemination activities.

¹⁰ There are also affinities with the US experience of community action research or participatory action research (Reardon 1998), where students and/or faculty assist community organisations in framing and undertaking research projects in order to address specific social problems or issues. This has been described as the ‘highest form of service-learning’ (Porpora 1999). Adapting this epithet, we contend that research-based placements are the highest form of placement learning activity.

A note on employability

Although the focus of our project was on the use of placements to enrich and complement students' understandings of politics, for reasons noted above, we came to realise that our work held important implications for the increasingly pressing concern with employability. As we will discover below, most of the students we sent on placements recognised that short research-based placements represented valuable forms of work experience. However, whereas placements have previously been thought of in terms of developing generic or transferable skills (e.g., Norton 2004, 2006), our research-based approach to placements enhanced students' higher order research skills. They each came away from their placements with powerful narratives of how they had undertaken and completed specific research projects, which are invaluable in terms of mapping personal development and performing in job applications and interviews (cf. Knight and Yorke, 2004, pp. 94, 137-38). Therefore, we argue for a more sophisticated notion of the benefits to employability from placement activities.

Contributions to a new pedagogy of placement learning

The Scholarship of Engagement for Politics has shifted the practice of placement learning in Politics and International Relations, with important implications for the social sciences and humanities more generally, in at least eight key dimensions:

- The emphasis on the importance of placement learning at level 2 in undergraduate programmes, so that students can draw from their real-world experiences in their final year of study and any delayed impacts can come into play. To date most non-sandwich style placement learning has taken place during the final year of study.
- The integration of placement learning into the formal curriculum of Politics and International Relations, by linking placements to specific modules of study.
- The embedding of placements in modules, through the negotiation of placement activities by academic staff with placement providers. To date, standard practice is for students to find and arrange their own placements.
- A move toward relatively short, intense placement activity, to make placement learning a meaningful possibility for full-time students with part-time jobs and part-time students with other responsibilities. Hence, we have achieved a shift away from old-style sandwich courses and extended placements, and have made a significant effort to address the agenda of widening participation in higher education by reducing the possibility that certain students will be excluded from placement activities.
- Running placements during term time, to enhance and reinforce the symbiosis between placement and campus activities.

- An emphasis on research-based learning and a shift away from the practice of work experience toward undergraduate research.
- The development of a more sophisticated notion of the role of placements in enhancing employability: shifting away from thinking in terms of work experience encourages more emphasis on the development of students' research skills and higher-order capabilities. Paradoxically, by not focusing on the employability aspect of placements, research-based placements enhance employability to a greater extent than regular work placements.
- The employment of blogs and an integrated IT platform for students to record their progress and for university staff to remotely monitor students' activities, and to support all three categories of stakeholders: students, placement providers and universities. In particular, we have moved away from private, paper-based learning journals toward a more public recording of learning in the context of placements, which, as we'll see below, made a significant difference to the content and style of student reflections on their experiences.

Project Activities

At the beginning of the project a full project team was appointed, including a dedicated project manager and a dedicated IT officer. A steering committee was also set up to support the project with meetings then held bi-annually. The steering committee was composed of a range of representatives from all three partner institutions, and included student representatives from all three partner institutions, who were latterly students who had undertaken placements through the project.

In order to achieve the aims of the project, the project team carried out three rounds of placements, sending students from the 3 host universities to a range of political actors for placements ranging from 5 to 16 days in length. Data was collected throughout the placements from all stakeholders and the results and trends used to develop the placement organisation organically.

Research into placement provision

Before the primary work of the project was undertaken, research was conducted into placement learning provision within UK Politics/IR departments. A letter and online questionnaire were created on the project's website and the same posted to 109 Politics departments. The questionnaires were analysed and the results used to inform the project, dissemination and this evaluation.

The results indicated that of the ninety-six UK and Irish higher education institutions identified in the survey, in which Politics/International Relations is taught at undergraduate level:

- Sixty-five do not offer any kind of placement learning. Of which:
 - 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 75% of cases placements were for ten weeks or longer.
- 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.

Setting up placements

The first step taken by the project team to begin setting up placements within the three universities was the applications that had to be made at each university to allow for regulation changes to specific modules to facilitate the integration of placements into

the formal curriculum. Each of the applications was different and had to be in line with the regulations at the particular institution. The primary change made to each module was to allow for the changes to the assessment criteria used for placement students. The process was fairly straightforward in each case and all applications were approved. At Oxford Brookes University, the placements were simply married to the pre-existing Independent Study Module, with no amendments required.¹¹ At Coventry University, minor alterations to module descriptors were approved at a meeting of the subject group. The University of Warwick had a more complex module amendment process, requiring the production of an extensive rationale for the alterations. At the universities of Coventry and Warwick the applications had to be made well in advance of the required changes.

Recruiting and selecting students

In order to recruit students within each university to undertake placements, all students opting for the module(s) hosting the placements were contacted by the project team. This communication varied from team members presenting to eligible students in a lecture or seminar, students being contacted by e-mail or letter or awareness being raised more generally through dissemination work within the department.

Eligible students were asked to complete an application form to indicate their desire to undertake a placement and the placement team used the forms to decide which students should be sent on placement. If necessary, students were also interviewed in order to narrow the field of applicants.

Recruiting providers

A letter was sent to over 120 local political actors to ask if they would be interested in hosting a placement through the project. We received a positive response rate of 10%, which we have learned from placement officers is generally par for the course. A follow-up letter produced a further eight positive responses. Providers were also recruited by various team members, who used their established contacts with local MP, NGOs and other political actors. Team members at Oxford Brookes University were able to draw on their existing relationships with voluntary organisations, and at Coventry University we gained two placement offers from MA students who worked for NGOs.

Turnover of providers could be fairly rapid and maintaining the number of placement providers was an on-going task, but many providers stayed with the project for 2 or more rounds and hosted as many as 6 students in all throughout the project. It was felt by the team that the effort of recruiting providers would be likely to decrease over

¹¹ It is interesting to note that models of independent study, where students negotiate the curriculum with their tutors, are cited as one of the precursors of work-based learning and placement-learning activities more generally (see Boud, Solomon and Symes 2001: 8). In a sense, marrying placements to the Independent Study Module at Oxford Brookes both brings us full circle and marks one possible means of fulfilling the mission and potential of the module.

time as providers became more involved with the placement scheme and therefore less likely to drop out.

The reasons that providers gave for withdrawing from the project were varied and no strong patterns emerged. Examples included staff changes, time constraints and office space shortages. Another issue noted by the project team was that on more than one occasion a provider was lost because a weaker student was hosted and the provider felt they gained less than other participating providers. This provided the team with an interesting conflict of interest. Team members were keen to send less able or confident students on placement as it was felt those students could have the most to gain from the experience, but by sending such students the team risked losing placement providers.

Website development

The project's dedicated website and resources platform was launched in July 2006 at www.politicsinaction.ac.uk. The site has been and will continue to be a major dissemination tool for the project, and it holds copies of all of the documents produced, which can be used by others, free of charge, to set up their own placements. The web site also provided a useful source of information for prospective placement providers and students throughout the project. The aim of the project website was to promote and encourage placement learning within other universities, support new initiatives and assist others who wanted to provide placements. Although the project itself had a limited life the website will remain live, hosting valuable resources on the web, relevant for both students and placement participating universities, to use now that the project has ended.

For further information on the development of the project website refer to Appendix 5 at the end of this document.

Pre-placement briefings

For each round of placements a pre-placement briefing was carried out for the cohort of students about to undertake placements. In round one the briefing was run over a few hours but for rounds two and three it was expanded to a whole day and included sessions on students' expectations, their perceptions of politics, communication skills and the sort of documents they may come across on their placements. The day also included a session in which placement students from previous rounds spoke about their experiences. In each case around 15 students attended the event.

After the second and third round briefings feedback was requested from students on the day so that the team could record which elements of the day they had found most and least useful. In the feedback gained over the two rounds 100% of the students said that the session had given them a better idea of what to expect from their placement and that the day had been useful preparation for their placement. The most popular session was the skills session, where subjects such as confident communication, body language and meeting people were covered. This session was rated as useful by 100% of attendees. Another popular session was one which involved students from the

previous round talking about their experiences, with 96% of the attending students agreeing that it was a useful session. The sessions on expectations, perceptions of politics and looking at documents students might come across on placement, all of which got similarly positive feedback from the students. Some comments from the sessions were:

Allowed to consider biases and perceptions that will be taken into placement and also allowed for reflection of last year's study.

It's been a very interesting and useful day, the place was very friendly and the tutors really friendly and open to all our questions. Thank you!

Fun, informative, clear, enthusing and tremendously informative. Sincere thanks for your energy, passion and providing us with the opportunity to see politics in action.

It was comforting to speak to other students who have already done placements. It really offered an insight into what to expect and how to make the most of my placement.

Overall the day was very helpful – especially the guidance on how to cope in the workplace and hearing from previous participants in the scheme.

I feel a lot more confident after the pre-placement briefing. The sessions really clarified the purpose of the scheme and gave me a better idea of how to approach my particular placement and what is expected from me.

The day made me feel more confident about the placement and made me look forward to it! Very interesting and worthwhile day.

Negotiating and structuring placements

The project was fortunate to be offered an initial placement with a candidate in the 2005 general election, which became in effect a pilot for the placements in year two. The team were able to reflect upon the lessons learnt from this pilot placement, which assisted in the latter stages of year one in setting up the network of placement providers.

One key element of negotiating placements with providers was a face-to-face visit. The project team found that a visit, rather than a phone call or email correspondence, meant that a relationship was built up, making providers more likely to commit to the project and communication more clear and effective. The visit was also a key element of our risk assessment and minimization strategy: we were able to satisfy ourselves that the locations where we would be sending students were safe and did not raise any concerns; and establishing good relationships with the placement providers reduced the likelihood of placements falling through or not providing a satisfactory experience for students.

In each case the member of the project team organising the placement spoke to both the provider and the student to discover which days were most suitable for the student to attend their placement. The provider's preferences on days, duration and pattern of

attendance were taken into account as was the student's availability. In all cases a priority was to ensure that the student missed as few lectures as possible. The team member also negotiated with the placement provider to ensure that each student would be involved with a piece of research work and would be fully involved the work of the organisation within which they were working. The team found that this decreased the likelihood of students being treated as though they were on work experience and given more menial tasks.

The project team produced a partnership agreement, a document which recorded all of the negotiated activities for the placement, the dates on which the student would attend the placement and detailed the responsibilities of each stakeholder. The agreement, signed by the student, provider and university, was vital in ensuring that all parties knew what to expect from the placement and what was expected of them.

Creation of document templates

One of the initial aims of the project was to produce a full set of documents to support the implementation of placement provision in any institution. All of the templates produced for use during the project are hosted on the project website and are downloadable, providing a resource to other institutions wishing to set up placement learning initiatives. Feedback from outside institutions has shown that pulling together health and safety information is the most likely impediment to setting up placements and is the area most likely to put institutions off developing placement learning schemes. The project has therefore provided comprehensive health and safety information for prospective placement providers and students and full notes detailing the source of the guidance.

The partnership agreement template is a key document hosted on the site. It was developed over the three rounds of placement and provides an informal 'contract' between the host university, the placement student and the placement provider. Producing such a document was one of the original project goals and the team ensured that feedback from both providers and students was taken into account in the development of the document. One of the key elements of the document is that it lists negotiated placement activities, which ensures that all parties are clear about their own responsibilities and each other's expectations.¹²

The following template documents can be found at the project website: <http://www.politicsinaction.ac.uk>:

- Partnership Agreement
- Information for Placement Providers
- Placement Provider Application Form
- Placement Provider De-Brief Form

¹² In drafting this document, we were guided by the QAA's code of practice (QAA 2001, 2007). We also extracted examples of good practice from documentation produced by colleagues at other universities who have pioneered placement learning. We are grateful to John Craig of the University of Huddersfield and Lisa Harrison of the University of West of England for sharing with us the teaching materials they produced for their placement modules.

- Health and Safety Guide for Placement Providers (extracted from the health and safety documentation drafted by the Universities Safety and Health Association (USHA) for the Universities and Colleges Employers Association)
- Information for Placement Students
- Student Application Form
- Health and Safety Guide for Placement Students (extracted from the USHA documentation)
- Authority to Start Placement (extracted from the earlier version of the UCEA's health and safety documentation)
- Placement Student De-Brief Form

Dissemination

The Scholarship of Engagement team were involved in over 20 dissemination activities throughout the project, from national conferences to workshops organised for the project by the project team. Initially the dissemination was based on the early work of the project and involved gauging the responses of others to the project's aims and using their questions to inform the development of the placements. The team continued with this dissemination work throughout the project and in the later stages were able to disseminate the findings of the project and inform others of the successes and challenges they had faced in providing placements.

The most significant dissemination event within the project was the workshop run by the team at the University of Warwick in January 2007. The event brought together colleagues from both the world of politics and those interested in teaching and learning issues. The aim of the event was to answer the question posed by the workshop title: Placement Learning in Politics: Essential, Added Value, or Plain Frivolous? The answers the team were led to by the workshop and which informed the final year of our project and its evaluation were:

Essential? Yes – there are distinct and discernable intellectual and personal benefits of undertaking a placement. However, workshop participants felt that it was important not to overstate the claims and recognise that placements are not for everyone.

Added-value? Yes – but only if module specific. The conclusion of the workshop was that placements may enhance student learning, but should be linked to a student's studies, and embedded in the curriculum.

Plain frivolous? No – but we should not be over-ambitious. The consensus of the workshop participants was that at this stage in the development of placement learning within UK higher education, we should temper our ambitions – start small, allow placement schemes to take root before considering expansion, and limit the scale of activity in order to manage the practicalities of placement organisation.

Feedback from both the students involved in the workshop and the attendees was strong and positive:

Thanks . . . for a well organised and well run workshop. It was indeed helpful, confirms our intentions to go ahead with an MA level placement and provided us with useful food for thought.

. . . it was certainly a pleasure to share my experiences with a wider audience who could perhaps benefit from a student perspective. Also it was good to speak to the other students on my round. The irony is that I wouldn't normally have the self-confidence to give such a talk but for my placement I gave it a go. So thank you and the FDTL team.

Thanks for a fab workshop. Good luck with the project. In spite [sic] of what my cynicism might have suggested, I think your project is really important and it's great to see it happening. The student presentations at the end were great - they were really engaging and fab presenters.

Many thanks for an excellent workshop on Friday. I really enjoyed it . . . I will be meeting [colleagues] here to discuss your project this week - I think we will want to explore how we might get involved. It is a really exciting project.

One final dissemination activity to note was the cascade presentation at Keele University in March 2007. The event was a strong success for both the staff at Keele and the project team members because of the two-way dialogue and the differences between Keele and the 3 project universities, which highlighted new aspects of the placement learning process for both parties.

Going forward, the emphasis for the project team is now on written dissemination. The team aim that this evaluation report will draw together both the qualitative and quantitative data produced throughout the project and the report will become a primary resource for team members to draw on when writing about the project's work.

Data collection

Throughout the project student and provider feedback was captured via questionnaires, interviews, assessed work and reflective journals. All of this data was crucial to the project developing organically over its three years and the data has also been a vital part of the project's evaluation work. As far as possible the data is held on our website so that others can learn from the experiences of the project and the feedback captured.

All placement students completed a reflective journal, most using the project blog, and the results were captured to provide the basis of our qualitative analysis of the student experience. The blogs were an excellent way to catch the students' more informal thoughts and reflections on their experiences as well as giving the project team the opportunity to unobtrusively monitor their attendance and progress on the placement. Indeed, in the post-placement interviews all of the students told us that they were pleased we did not visit them while on their placements, as that would have undermined their sense of personal responsibility and autonomy. The students themselves were generally very positive about using the blog system for their journals

and enjoyed the experience of completing their reflective journals, although some found it was one thing too many to do during an already busy time:

The only release of your . . . you know everything that's going on inside your head, okay my mum doesn't want to know about European social inclusion. You know okay I could send an email back to one of the team, but to just release all of it online I actually looked forward to it, sort of mid afternoon, actually enjoyed the last hour or 45 minutes just sort of typing away. And actually over the weekend I wrote a lot down myself that was just just sort of other stuff that was more sort of personal stuff that you end up sort of realising while you're over there . . . yeah and wrote for a while.

I really liked the blogs, I think that was a good idea. I think the opportunity to sit down and write it when you're not really under pressure of anyone watching you or anything like that. Especially when it's fresh in your mind, it's quite nice to be able to write that, and I think you'll get possibly more honesty from people on a blog than in an interview like this.

It is valuable, because it makes you think at the end of every day kind of, what have I been watching? What have I learnt today?

As you know I fell way behind with it and I did find it difficult to do. I can see why it was there and for the first couple of days it was quite good to sit down. But it quickly became an onerous thing to have to complete, I won't pretend it didn't. And do still have the last couple of days to write up as well.

An interesting and slightly unexpected aspect of the students' use of the blogs was that many of them gained a great deal from reading each other's entries.¹³ The system was not set up specifically with that outcome in mind, but many students mentioned that they had learnt about politics not only from their own placements but from reading about each other's too.

Also reading other people's experiences was very useful to give my [placement] context and sort of see the contrast. It's not a generic placement, it is a unique placement and you get your own experience out of it. To see the contrast or the similarities from other people's blog entries was very interesting to see.

I think it was 'My first day in Westminster' massive great essay, I was reading it and sort of . . . really enjoying it actually. And it was nice to also see what [another placement student with the same provider] thought of things. I was talking to him during the week but from sort of Tuesday onwards we were only kind of bumping into each other every now and again. So it was nice to hear about what he was doing and how it was different and the kind of thing he was working on. And it will be

¹³ As previous studies have indicated, given the unconventional nature of placements compared to regular learning activities, it is surprising that students do not support each other more (see Smith et al 2004: 200-201). Given this reticence, blogs provide a very efficient and effective means of facilitating inter-student communication. Future projects might like to explore the use of SMS text messaging, discussion forums and Facebook-style websites in this regard.

interesting to see what everyone else ended up doing and see if they enjoyed it as much as I did and had the same kind of experience.

I do know that it's great to just come home, write what you did, read other people's blogs, you know, see how you know others sort of get on, so you can check how we get on.

Feedback from the student interviews carried out after each round of placements led the project team to change the way they interacted with the students through their blogs. In the first two rounds of placements the team read the blogs but did not give any feedback and the only intervention was from the project manager who contacted students if they were not completing their journals. After receiving comments from students in the first two rounds of placements, the team altered their approach and asked students questions in order to stimulate debate and to ensure that students knew that their blogs were being read (Cooper 1998; Mills 2001):

Exactly. Cos like you write a blog and then think 'Oh well no one's going to read this'.

Interviewer: *Am I blogging to nowhere.*

Yeah exactly. So I think ... it didn't really require too much intervention, maybe like the odd email or something. Reading your blog it looks great, hope it continues well.

Some students were aware however that the team were using the blogs to monitor their process and saw this as a positive thing:

And plus with like the blog we were able to write absolutely everything down. And that in a way was a way of us communicating with you. So if you'd seen that we were absolutely hating it you could have got in contact with us

I think the blogging you should definitely keep for the future students. Especially if they're writing I've had a horrible day, everyone is being horrible to me and you can e-mail them.

Student interviews post-placement were also carried out to this end using generic questions to ensure consistency across the cohorts and the universities. All interviews were filmed to provide captured evidence of the student experience. Placement providers were also interviewed post-placement using generic questions to ensure consistency.

Students' assessed work, the requirements for which varied between the universities, was collected and was used to evaluate the impact that assessment had on the student experience. A post-placement questionnaire using the Likert Scale was sent to all students 6-12 months after the completion of their placement. This data has given us an insight into the longer-term impact of placement learning on the students and their studies.

The Project's Findings

Assessment

The final assessment models at each university had some common elements and necessarily had some differences in order to comply with each university's own guidelines and restrictions. All students, whichever university they were from, had to complete a reflective journal and attend a post-placement interview and in all cases a piece of written work related to the placement was required, but the marks allocated to each of these elements of work varied at each institution.

At the University of Warwick the placements were embedded in the level-two module Politics of the UK (PUK) and the placement evaluation made up 20% of the final module mark. The placement evaluation section of the module consisted of a reflective journal, an interview and a 2000-word case report. The journal and the interview were obligatory but did not count towards the module mark, being marked on a pass/fail basis. The case report was a written assessment of a theme or concept in UK politics related to the placement experience (for example 'political participation' or 'bureaucracy') and the title of the report was decided upon in consultation with the placement tutor at Warwick. The remaining 80% of the PUK module was made up of either a 3000-word assessed essay worth 40% and a 1.5 hour written examination worth 40% or a 3 hour examination worth the entire remaining 80%.

At Coventry University the placements were embedded in two different level-two modules: Contemporary British Government module and The New European Union. One student was also offered a placement through the new Work Experience module offered by the Department of International Studies and Social Science. The Work Experience module consisted of 100% coursework comprising a research design of 1,500 words, a report of 3,000 words, and a reflective learning journal. The research design accounted for 20% of the final mark, the learning journal for 20%, and the report for 60%. The other two modules required either a 1500-word reflective journal or a 2000-word essay. In all cases the student had to attend a post-placement interview and complete a reflective journal, which were again unmarked but obligatory.

At Oxford Brookes University the placements were run through the Independent Studies Module, which gave much more freedom and flexibility regarding the length of each placement and to the way in which it was assessed. The assessment of students' work for the module consisted of a 3000-word assessed essay on a theme or concept in politics related to the placement experience and the placement evaluation element. Once again, the reflective journal and the post-placement interview were unmarked but obligatory.

In each university the student worked with their placement tutor to negotiate the title of their written work. A list of the essay titles chosen by the students during the project is shown below:

In light of your placement, is the MP a central figure in political participation in Britain?

Pressure groups: typology and democracy.

The Civil Service – are the criticisms justified?

What have been the difficulties in implementing the Government's "Overview and Scrutiny" function for local government? A study with particular reference to Coventry City Council.

To what extent do party political structures affect the work of councillors in Local Government?

To what extent is the UK electorate informed about EU issues?

Why is EU membership such a controversial issue for the UK Conservative Party?

To what extent do NGOs enhance democracy within the UK political system?

Critically analyse the role of local government in enhancing democracy within the UK's political system.

Critically analyse the extent to which the renewal of the Trident nuclear weapons system in 2007 confirms the UK's reliance upon the US for its defence.

Is local government in Coventry accountable and efficient?

To what extent are local elected representatives influenced by their party leadership?

Is there a democratic deficit in Brussels?

An investigation into the ways in which problematic drug misusers can be deemed "effective citizens" in the making and delivery of substance abuse policy.

The role of regional interest organisations in Brussels policy networks.

Foreign policy issues and the composition of MPs' post-bags: the influence of constituency make-up.

How far do standard models of representation accord with the actual behaviour of MPs? - 2 case studies.

Advocacy agencies or implementers of policy: the role of community organisations in the field of substance abuse.

The role of local councillors as conduits for community grievances.

The project team were able to monitor the impact of the difference assessment regimes on the students at the three universities. One very useful medium for such feedback was the post-placement interview carried out with each student. Some general feedback and comments from students regarding the assessment used through the project was:

In the essay I had to write afterwards I wrote about pressure groups and where the typology that actually is applied to them within academic literature, whether that was relevant, or whether that was suitable. And I chatted to various people when I was there about how, about what they thought about...I said to them about democracy and how you classify pressure groups. And one woman said to me, I wrote in the essay actually, one woman said that much of that theory goes out the window when you're within the organisation. So, perhaps it made what I learnt before seem a little bit abstract, in that sense, but . . .

I had a really interesting . . . I interviewed him to have some stuff to use for this piece of work and also just cos I was quite inquisitive about it I thought I'd try and blag an interview with him which was really . . . I mean he was really brilliant about that, I had a lot of respect for him cos he could have just said no, I'm sorry don't do it. . . . But you know I made it clear to him that I was going to use it for the piece of work and then I wouldn't spread it around or anything like that. He was extremely frank with me and I had a really good chat about it so that was really interesting.

If you could explicitly kind of define a theme for the placement that you could then take on to the assessed essay, then I think that would um, that would make the whole thing seem quite coherent. Then you'd know what you were looking for when you were doing your placement, and then you could really like gain, you know, ask people's opinions, and gain like practical experience of it.

Students were also asked if their placement had been influenced by the assessed work they knew they had to complete:

Interviewer: And did you find the fact that you knew you had to write an essay changed the way you approached the placement, do you think?

No, I didn't even consider it. I guess I don't know, because I saw that . . . I didn't think of it as a placement when I was there, I was thinking of it as more of work, and learning for me, not for the grade. So my mindset there was: this is my job, and this is what I'm gonna do. I wasn't thinking of it within this degree.

I was relating things in my head to how else that could be seen, in terms of whether it promotes democracy, or whether it can be classified or not with the pressure group typology we'd learnt about in our course. Yeah, I suppose I was relating to that. Whether that was because I knew I had to write an essay, or whether that was just a natural thing I don't know.

Interviewer: *In what ways might the fact that this placement was to be a formal assessed part of your studies . . . do you think that affected your approach to this place compared to the Ainsworth placement?*

It's interesting you mention it, no. I mean during the placement, I totally forgot about that really, although I probably should have remembered it ... which is very interesting.

I mean I was very conscious and it was always at the front of my mind that it was assessed, it wouldn't make any difference, cos I mean I was as always, you know very committed, very motivated and interested about doing it and all the rest of it, and got loads from it.

Some students found the fact that the placements were assessed an added pressure or were unsure of what was expected of them, despite receiving written guidance, information during the pre-placement briefings and support where necessary from project team members:

The assessment, the actual essay, I was a bit concerned with, cos I wasn't sure how much emphasis was meant to be put on my placement, and how much was theory based, and obviously because of my placement, because of the length of time, I had to go back home and do work, then it was due in quite shortly afterwards.

Um, to be totally honest the thing I was really worrying about was being assessed at the end, cos I thought maybe the pre-placement briefing you know told me certain things about my assessment or my blogs and stuff.

I think because in my personal experience, and I found this in a wider academic context, this year is, when I've been given freedom to chose my own essays, I've chosen the wrong ones, or I've been . . . because it's difficult getting an essay which you can write, you know the right length about, and in the right amount of detail about and that there is sufficient resources for . . . I think too much freedom for me is just a bad thing!

Interviewer: *What are you writing for this module because you've got a different module, different to the others.*

I spoke to [the project team member] and he goes it's a five thousand word report. And I go well ok, but why am I supposed to write five thousand words about it? And he goes, well, I'll give you a booklet, and a structure, and what you can write about. First you write about the first two and a half thousand, before you started, and then you can spend another thousand or something as a diary or something, then the rest would be on the end how much did you gain? What was your objectives? What was your priority when you started, and did you reach them? . . . Basically, I can't write five thousand words! . . . Honestly, I repeat myself!

Others however found the assessment structured their placement and gave them a goal and a focus:

I think the assessment by the essay was quite a good idea as well because it actually got you thinking, not necessarily just about the placement, as in

the placement linked to your module, which I think is the idea really. And I think that the essay was possibly the thing that tied them both together.

I said what I was thinking of doing, and they gave me a few ideas, and gave me a few examples that I could use in my essay. I sort of had a vague idea what I'd like to link it to at first, but I actually changed my idea later on, just from my actual placement experience. So that was, I think that was a positive thing actually. It helped me think about a certain element of the module.

And also the fact that like with the Politics of the UK module which it's part of, it's a lot easier when you get . . . there's a lot of benefits. Like 20% of your module examination mark is actually through your placement.

I think it was definitely like talking to different . . . because they let me talk to lots of different MEPs because they knew I had to write an essay, and definitely like just getting . . . like asking them questions. I did a couple of like mini-interviews for like potential essay questions, cos I thought it'd be good to go to open your mind . . . and that was really good. Like speaking to like Eurosceptics and then the pro-Europeans and things like that, so that was probably my favourite thing.

Whether or not students found the assessment of their placement a positive or a negative element of the experience, half of them felt that the method of assessment did influence their placement. In the post placement questionnaire sent to all three rounds of placement students 50% of the respondents said that the method of assessment had focused them on the politics of their placement, with 21% strongly agreeing that this was the case.

The impact of placements on learning

The majority of students interviewed felt that the placement they had undertaken would have an impact on their future learning. In our post-placement questionnaires 78% felt that the placement had helped their understanding of 'politics', 72% had already been able to use their placement experience in assignments and 64% had been able to use their experience in class discussions.

In their blogs, students clearly demonstrated that their understanding of politics had been complemented and enriched by their placement experiences:

I am beginning to see issues work their way through the policy process . . . I think a really good way to get an idea of the workings of the organisation would be to follow an issue around the committees like this – I am beginning to get an idea of how they all relate to each other . . .

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 [have] found my experience very useful – it has given me an understanding of local government that I didn't have before. It has also shed some interesting light for me on the role political parties play in democracy.

Comments from the interviews carried out with students immediately after their placement ended also indicated that students felt that their placements either had or would have an impact on their future studies:

I think I might already have done that actually. Particularly with Politics in the UK. And actually probably with one or two of the other modules as well. It was a relatively short placement, you know 2 weeks isn't a long time. But I think the depth of it and the reach that it allowed you and the ability to speak to certain people that it allowed you speak to allowed me to get a lot more out of it than 2 weeks at [the placement] might sound. And I think it certainly helped with, you know, allowing me to contextualise a lot of the stuff that you read and relate to a lot of the stuff you read.

Yes I guess . . . yeah you just get a bit more kind of informed I guess. So you can kind of draw from what you learn in a text book and what you learn . . . I have to say with the essays that I had for this module it was much easier to sort of write it . . . more information I guess, more of a more informed view of what it's really kind of about. So the representation aspect of an MP's role. So yeah.

Yeah, I definitely think it will. Yeah, I mean as I say it's brought to . . . I know something now about an area I never would have studied anyway. It's very boring to read about local government, and you know, actually quite interesting to observe and take part in. So that has informed all kinds of questions about the relationship between national government and local government, all kinds of questions about devolution to the regions that are very relevant at the moment. And as government is not an area that I've considered before it is, yeah it's definitely informed that, I think.

Employability: preparation for work

18 out of the 26 students interviewed post-placement talked about the placement having an impact on what job they wanted to do once they left university. In some cases the placement had reinforced an idea they already had about the area they wanted to work in:

I think it's underlined that I'd like to work for an institution like the EU, if not the EU. I've been thinking about the Foreign Office or the EU or NATO or something like that, an institution like that I'd love to work for eventually, I think it's underlined that definitely.

So yeah I've always wanted to be an MP or work in the civil service, so I think that's just kind of brought it back that I want to go that direction rather than be an MEP and go a bit more you know European . . . I don't know, I think it kind of enforced it. I mean I never had the idea of being an MEP anyway.

Yes, it's changed for the positive. Because I was thinking about working for an MP and then . . . I definitely so want to do that now, definitely. It's just a matter of like kind of deciding if it's a constituency I would like to work on in parliament.

. . . it has most certainly given me some food for thought regarding my career. I can well imagine myself working as an officer in such a setting, responsible for education services for a city, for example.

For others the experience meant that they decided they definitely wouldn't want to work in a certain area after their degree ended:

I don't think I do want to work for an MP . . . and I suppose that's something I got out of the placement. I mean I really enjoyed it but I wouldn't want to do it as a job, certainly not in a constituency office anyway.

I mean I enjoyed working there for 2 weeks and probably could work there for . . . I don't know maybe 3 months or so, but I think more I would get a little bit frustrated with this, the actual things that you're doing they didn't really interest me enough. And I think that is good because otherwise I suppose you could apply for an internship and then you would only find out sort of like part way through that it wasn't something that you actually really enjoyed.

And in others it opened up new possibilities and opportunities that students hadn't necessarily considered:

Well I wasn't too sure about where I wanted to go. I knew I wanted to do something related to politics but I wasn't sure where. I would be quite happy now to go and get a job somewhere in local government.

Yeah, I definitely would say beforehand I was very interested in being a civil servant in Whitehall at the national level, and I'd say its definitely broadened my interest, and I'd now be quite happy to, you know, be an officer at a council maybe; or you know, to work at the local level somehow, because it did seem, you know, really interesting, and the kind of things I was interested in. So it was definitely beneficial from that point of view, I think.

As we stressed earlier, the project team were clear from the inception of the project that the aim was to provide research placements rather than work experience to the students and offering employability skills and career progression were not explicit elements of the project. However, within the post-placement questionnaires 72% of respondents felt that the placement had influenced their career aspirations, 75% said they felt better prepared for work following their placement and 86% felt they had gained skills that would be useful when they began work.

Placement length

The placements organised through the project were relatively short compared to placements usually offered in UK Politics departments and the team sought feedback from both the students and the providers about their experiences and preferences. Generally speaking the students were happy with the length of their placements but if anything the request would have been to stay a little longer. One influencing factor on whether or not students would have liked their placements to be longer was whether or not they were having to miss any lectures by attending their placements. Those that missed no lectures often felt a longer placement would have been preferable, but those who missed the same lecture over a few weeks felt that a longer placement might have been a problem:

Interviewer: And would it have put pressure on your other studies do you think, if you had gone on a longer placement?

Um, if it was in the Easter holidays, I reckon you could do another week or so, it would depend on the essays you're doing and various things.

I wouldn't mind it to have been longer, the only problem is that I missed a few lectures, and obviously that's not good; you have to catch up and things like that.

I mean you've got to consider like the lessons you miss. Yeah I didn't miss that really. But it's . . . anything longer I might have been a bit you know . . . might have been a bit too much. But I think it was good, yeah.

Longer would have been better but that's just cos I was enjoying it and liking what I was doing. So would have preferred it to have gone on for longer. But logistically with the amount of work and stuff that I had, it was a good amount of time I think

Interviewer: And would you have liked the placement to have been longer, or were you happy with it as it was?

Um, considering the balance with the rest of my timetable, the rest of my work, it was about right. So I don't think I wanted any longer. Certainly wouldn't want it any shorter.

Students at Oxford Brookes University completed longer placements because for them the coursework related to their placements constituted 100% of the module mark. The response regarding the length of placement from these students tended to be better than from those students at Coventry or Warwick:

Brookes students:

No I thought it was perfect actually. But I have to say that time goes seriously fast. Like every day like passed just like that. And ... so yeah I think a bit more time maybe, but 2 months is definitely good. I mean I've learnt loads

I think it was really a perfect time. And I've spoken to a couple of people and they told me that 8 weeks was really quite long, it's a long

commitment. And doing mine for one week I could really really focus only on internship.

The length . . . I was glad, I think I got one of the longer ones. I was very, very happy with that, because the more the better for me.

Warwick and Coventry students:

Interviewer: Would you have preferred to have been there for longer, if you could have been?

Um, yeah, yeah, perhaps if that had been an option. I know having done it; I would definitely look in to doing an internship there, perhaps during next summer, or after my degree. So that's been useful in that sense. Yeah, if I could have been there longer, I wouldn't have said no, I suppose.

Um . . . longer, if that is possible within the realms of the projects. Purely because I can see how someone could go out to [my provider] and not have as much benefit from it as I did . . . even if they went for longer. Well obviously if they went for longer there's more chance, but . . . just because I had three events when I was in my second week which everything was pushed towards. So you see the office actually working at full capacity, what it can do.

I'd love to have stayed longer, I was really enjoying it and I was quite sad to go at the end of it . . . I suppose it would be whether the MEP would have the person for that long because they have to take time out of their schedule to deal with you, talk to you and everything, but if it was down to me I would have had maybe a week longer.

However, some students felt that the time they had spent of placement was sufficient and they didn't think they would have learnt much more by being there longer:

I'm not sure how much more I could've learnt, by going much longer, um, I think I got out of my particular placement, as much as I could've done. If it was longer I wouldn't say no to that, because I did enjoy it.

I don't feel that I've learnt load more since, I think the week's intensive was plenty of time.

Yeah, six days. Um, yeah I think so. I think it was about the right time actually, it was enough to keep me interested, but . . . In terms of, I think the work in the office was quite interesting because we had to just see what the everyday tasks were. I think six days was long enough to do that, but short enough to keep me interested, if that makes sense.

Placement providers' preference was generally for longer placements, though many acknowledged that they were hosting placements for altruistic reasons, rather than any gain to themselves:

It was fine, but they're too short really for us to get anything out of it. He was a pleasant enough lad, he did what he wanted to do and I think he did

it quite successfully, I mean I've looked at the disk that he gave me and for a first stab at something like this it's really very good.

I think the longer the better actually because they really get into it. For anybody coming into a job say as a researcher, it takes them a good 12 months just to figure out how this place works, it's not a simple thing at all, it's something that really you've got to spend a bit of time at.

I think in terms of the time, two days a week for 4 weeks, it perhaps wasn't long enough to get her into some of the things we'd normally get someone doing work experience into.

We feel that a one-week placement is not long enough for either party. A longer placement would be much more worthwhile. That said, it was a pleasure to have [the student] with us: he was very reliable and interested.

Student expectations

The most common reason students gave for applying for a placement was that it was more than or different to lectures:

I'm not entirely convinced that what you learn in lectures is actually enough, and so if you leave uni and you've only got a degree, you've got no real knowledge.

. . . it's just a completely different way of learning.

I think one of the main ones was that I prefer a lot more to do actual real hands-on I guess experience, that sort of thing. Rather than always just writing essays and always sitting in lectures and always sitting in seminars.

Students also wanted to see politics in action and learn from that experience:

I was quite interested in kind of exploring the difference between sort of theory and actual reality and how things are on the ground.

it sounded like an interesting way to actually see things in action. So it was partly seeing the politics happening in real life

Basically I just wanted to put a theory that you learn in lectures and seminars into practice. I mean I think it's so much more beneficial if you actually experience what you're learning.

And, although it was emphasised throughout the project that the team was organising research-based placements and not work experience, students were keen to gain work experience, employability skills or an entry for their CV:

Firstly, it was quite a career option for me because it's just a great work experience and they're just so difficult to get normally. I thought, this is a really good opportunity, with it being set up for me for a week to just see if I like it and see what actually goes on.

I wanted to do something to get experience that would benefit my studies and my CV to be honest with you.

Doing university studies I think is extremely important that you undertake some sort of work experience for many different reasons. One of them could be for example employers today really look for some extra skills in graduates.

I know you said it wasn't supposed to be work experience, I just thought it was like a better way to get some work experience before applying for internships and things.

The provider experience

Eighteen placement providers hosted a total of 36 placements throughout the three rounds of placements in our project, including MPs, MEPs, regional government offices, local government, and non-governmental organisations. When questioned in our post-placement interviews, the most common comment from providers regarding what they had gained from the experience was an extra pair of hands:

. . . we always need another pair of hands and it's great if we have people, like those particular two, who work marvellously.

I've had a chat with the host teams and in both cases they feel they got something back that will be useful, which is good. I think the ward forum 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 on how the council works and 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.

Yes absolutely, it's always nice to have people around, we usually have lots of jobs they can do, with meetings, a number of meetings at the same time that we can't cover ourselves. We find that it's good for them to participate and good for us because we can get some feedback on what happened.

. . . in the bluntest sense, he was doing work that we would have had to do, yet it was very relevant work and I think he found it interesting so there was that.

Also writing these briefing notes, they're going to go out to over 200 people and they were used in a big event . . . on a purely selfish note it was one less thing that we had to do!

Providers also felt it was important and beneficial to have an outside influence and perspective from their placement student, with many commenting that it had been particularly useful to have a student studying politics placed with them:

It's useful for us as well because it's good for us to have an outside influence, because we're such a small office, it's nice to have other people in and hear their experiences

It's also just good to have some perspective from the outside because we're stuck in a sort of bubble here in Brussels. So it's nice to have someone's perspective on what we're working on, who's not here all the time.

Yes. It was good to work with our local universities. Also, the students challenged some of the way we do things – it's always good to have an external perspective

Many providers felt that the students gained more from the experience than they did, but had become involved with the project aware that this would be the case and keen to pass on their knowledge and experience to the students:

it's nice for us to impart our knowledge as well because we build up all this knowledge about immigration cases and stuff like that and it's nice to be able to explain what the housing situation is and what various other issues are going on.

I think it was useful for me, I mean it's always useful because people very often don't actually understand what members of parliament actually do, they're conditioned by what's said in the newspapers, rather than actually seeing what the job entails. 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.

We are trying desperately to get more young people involved in politics and that's exactly what we need and I think this is a good opportunity for students, for them to see how things work and if they are interested to actually stay in touch and we can help them.

As part of the project's final evaluation the team also asked two providers, who had hosted students in more than one round and from more than one institution, to reflect on their experiences as a placement provider:

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

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

Concluding reflections

Besides the motivation and commitment of students and their ability to manage their placement activities, which impressed the project team, along with the benefits to the Politics courses from the involvement of real-world actors, the project team wish to emphasise three main conclusions:

- The shaping power of assessment: From the post-placement student interviews and the coursework produced by the students, it emerged that the method of assessment of the student has an impact on the level of student engagement. Those students who had been asked to analyse a theme, concept or issue that emerged from their placement experience and write an essay on it looked more closely at the politics involved in their placement rather focusing on the work experience aspects of the placement. Placements were most successful when the research project the students undertook for their placement providers was closely related to the piece of coursework they wrote for their modules.
- Placement type: Some of the most effective placements with regard to engagement were those where the work the student was involved with was very closely related to their degree work, for example a student studying the European Union who is placed with an MEP. This was perhaps to be expected, but it was occasionally surprising that other students were not as able to seek out the politics of their placement as we might have assumed.

- Provider type: We assumed at the beginning of the project that placements with NGOs and charities would be easier to gain than those with MPs and MEPs, but in fact the opposite was true. Large NGOs seem to have set conceptions of what volunteers should do and how much time they should commit, whereas smaller NGOs and more traditional political actors were much more flexible and willing to accommodate the type of placement activity developed by this project.

The Future

The impact of the project on teaching and learning

The FDTL project has been included in discussions on the institutional learning and teaching strategy held by the University Council, Strategy Committee and Heads of Department Forum at the University of Warwick. The project has been included in key strategy documents at Oxford Brookes including the Brookes Student Learning Experience Strategy, the Brookes Learning and Teaching Action Plan, the Strategic Plan of the School of the Built Environment and the Strategic Plan of the School of Social Sciences and Law. At Coventry University the project has been included in discussions regarding learning and teaching at a departmental, faculty and university level, with the project being embedded at the departmental level in terms of the department's plan.

In overall terms the project has had a considerable impact on departmental culture, with there being a more vigorous discussion about learning and teaching issues at the national level. This has been reflected in the formation for the first time of a learning and teaching specialist group within the Political Studies Association and as such the FDTL projects as a collective have helped to become 'agents of change' in the discipline. This change is part of a broader impact whereby universities increasingly have to respond to issues that focus on the skills agenda, as outlined in the Leitch Report (Leitch 2006) and for which placements offer an important means of developing student skills within the subject disciplines. Institutions are aware of these needs, both in terms of the strategic points outlined in such reports as well as the bottom-up pressures that arise from such factors as the national student survey. At Coventry University, for example, the FDTL project has played an extremely important role in raising the profile of learning and teaching within the department and this in turn has had a knock-on effect on the student learning experience. The result is that the demand for placements is increasingly student-led and that in a competitive marketplace of higher education the experiences that students obtain from placements help to increase the sense of worth and value of their education as well as enhancing the profile of the university among external stakeholders.

Sustainability

Transferability funding has been awarded to the project by HEFCE and this additional phase of the project will seek to embed the Scholarship of Engagement for Politics as an innovative dimension of the Politics and International Relations curriculum in another four selected UK universities. During the main funding period, the project has devised a variety of models of the Scholarship of Engagement for Politics, and has demonstrated how these can be embedded into the undergraduate curriculum, thus enhancing the student learning experience. The transferability funding will allow the project to work intensively with an additional four partners in UK universities, with the aim of implementing the Scholarship of Engagement for Politics within their undergraduate curriculum. By intensifying the practice of the Scholarship of Engagement for Politics, this will also provide further evidence for the wider UK

academic community of the potential value of integrated placement learning within Politics/International Relations and cognate disciplines.

At the University of Warwick, placement learning is already a strong part of the university's strategic direction and is well supported institutionally. Members of the project team and the university's management are looking at ways in which placement learning can be firmly established within the Politics Department and possibly throughout the Faculty of Social Studies. The university also holds regular Placement Co-ordinator Meetings in order to bring together anyone who is involved in placement learning within the institution, giving strength to all such initiatives. The FDTL project has had the benefit of strong support from and links with the Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research, which is a CETL that is due to run until 2010.

At Coventry University, the Department of International Studies and Social Science is going to embed placement learning opportunities into both the undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes. At the undergraduate level placement learning will form part of some taught modules with the placements being a component of the overall pattern of assessment. At the postgraduate level it is scheduled that from September 2008 students will be able to take one unit of assessment in the specific form of a placement. These initiatives have been supported by the strategic establishment of a placement learning unit within the Faculty of Business Environment and Society.

At Oxford Brookes University, the Department of International Relations and Politics will be embedding placement learning into undergraduate programmes. The School of Social Sciences and Law is also exploring ways of rolling the experience out across a greater number of disciplines.

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Appendix 1

The Scholarship of Engagement for Politics

Report on stakeholders' experience of the project

(Part of the evaluation strategy)

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Scholarship of Engagement for Politics

Report on stakeholders' experience of the project as part of the evaluation strategy

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1.0 Executive summary

1. The report is built around the structure of the semi-structured interviews undertaken with a stakeholding group. In four parts it provides an executive summary, outlines the perception of different roles within the project, the project's strategic importance, its effects and finally, the potential futures and learning points gained from participating in the project's work. The report is written in summary form enlivened by the use of quotes that illustrate points made in the commentary.

2. This report will be used as a resource for final evaluative reporting on the progress and outcomes of the project.

3. The data set used as a resource for this report consists of semi-structured interviews with 10 individuals connected to the project.

4. Stakeholder perceptions of the project's core meaning and purpose varied. In essence there were five dimensions. These dimensions are not mutually exclusive but do have some implications for t&l practice and the way in which a placement might be supported.

- Placement as support for the academic subject through an on-site research or reflective project
- An opportunity for students to apply theoretical understanding to processes and practices in 'real-life' contexts
- An opportunity for students to experience 'actual' political environments
- An opportunity for students to have an enriched and challenging experience in a practice based environment
- An opportunity to enhance students' employability by expanding their understanding of relevant occupational contexts, make contacts and procure relevant pre-professional experience for CV purposes

5. Embedded in these conceptions are different justifications. On the one hand is a more generic purpose associated with insights into professional practice as a form of 'preparation' for future careers; on the other is a more academic justification concerned with furthering students' capacities as researchers and enlivening their appreciation of key concepts from the discipline of politics by their contextualisation in an organisational setting.

6. In general the project was universally seen as an opportunity to experiment and try out the feasibility of presenting students with placement opportunities that potentially combined a number of purposes. The learning points derived from the project include:

- Recognition of the excitement and enthusiasm generated by non-standard learning environments (placements) for students, providing impetus for study and motivation of a more general kind
- The importance of careful preparation and integration into course aims
- The challenge of integrating placement learning into a modular framework

- The challenge posed by designing a research or inquiry dimension within the placements (this issue balances the design of an inquiry strongly associated with academic curricular aims on the one hand, which might involve research training, with the needs or interests of the placement providers, who may or may not wish to pursue such purposes)
- The challenge of designing assessment processes for placement learning (this again involves a balance between more 'hard-nosed' assessment procedures based on academic criteria with more 'process' oriented learning gains which are much harder to pin down)
- As I mention above, perhaps the biggest challenge in the wider adoption of placement learning opportunities will be the prosaic problem of finding, nurturing and keeping good quality placements on a massive scale in domains and occupational areas without a tradition of placement activity
- If this kind of placement experience is not an 'entitlement' then it becomes an 'opportunity' and institutions are faced with the problem of deciding on what basis might such opportunities are to be distributed.

7. The strategic effect of the project depended on the following factors:

- Synergies produced by links with analogous developments
- The support and knowledge of the project provided by senior stakeholders
- Direct participation in the project of senior academics
- Synergies with the T&L strategies of the host institutions
- Existence of longer term contingencies (funding etc)
- An active and engaged dissemination strategy

8. The management of the project has been experienced positively by this stakeholder group and the unforeseen problems of project management (early staffing issues and long-term sickness) had been overcome by judicious appointments, commitment of project participants and continued distant support by the director.

2.0 Introduction

2.1 Purposes of the report

The Scholarship of Engagement for Politics does not intend to prove that placement learning enhances the student experience, but will provide examples of the ways in which placement learning can affect the student experience. This report depicts the experience of the project from those members of staff in the three participating institutions that have involvement in overseeing, administering, delivering or coordinating the placement experience of students within the project.

The approach to evaluation is in the broad tradition of utilization-focused evaluation that emphasises the use of the evaluation by those commissioning it. It is a modified conception in that it is not the commissioners who are the intended users but primarily the project team themselves. The utilization dimension, however, is retained as a core value. This short report is part of the strategy to depict the project from different participating perspectives and to identify commonalities as well as divergences of experience and understanding of the project's purposes and effects.

2.2 Structure and style of the report

The report is built around the structure of the semi-structured interviews undertaken with the stakeholding group. In four parts it provides an executive summary, outlines the perception of different roles within the project, the project's strategic importance, its effects and finally, the potential futures and learning points gained from participating in the project's work. The report is written in summary form enlivened by the use of quotes that illustrate points made in the commentary.

2.3 Connection with other reports

This report will be used as a resource for final evaluative reporting on the progress and outcomes of the project.

2.4 Data set and roles and background of the interviewees

The data set used as a resource for this report consists of semi-structured interviews with 10 individuals connected to the project. These individuals had the following broad roles (most of which overlapped)

- Steering group membership
- Chair of the steering group
- Project director
- Project coordinator
- Project IT coordinator
- Institutional project coordinator
- Those with responsibility for teaching and learning

The schedule (see appendix 1.1) used during the interviews formed a common framework for a conversation with each respondent.

3.0 Understanding of the project

Inevitably in a project of this type, stakeholder perceptions of its core meaning and purpose can vary. In essence we have five dimensions that were given different emphases during interview. These dimensions are not mutually exclusive but do have some implications for t&l practice and the way in which a placement might be supported. The project was understood in terms of the following dimensions of 'placement' practice:

- Placement as support for the academic subject through an on-site research project

"Essentially it is about placement learning but we are designing, redefining and rewriting what we mean by placement learning, because unfortunately that has become synonymous with work experience, which has become synonymous with graduate skills, key skills and everybody is bored of it. Because everybody is bored of it, people ignore the fact that there is incredible value to be had from placement learning, so let's raise the stakes, lets raise it to a level where it is more sophisticated, more in line with higher education core aim objectives these days, and actually place the emphasis upon the research element, on the task that the student will be required to do whilst on the placement, and to look at that and this research has been about doing that, so redesigning and evaluating and seeing whether our original core assumptions were right or not."

- An opportunity for students to apply theoretical understanding to processes and practices in 'real-life' contexts

"Well I would say that the scholarship of engagement is about expanding the arena for learning opportunities for at least a selected group of students. It provides opportunities, in a fairly focused way, for expanding the skills repertoire of students who are given the opportunity."

"I would say it was an approach to placements which prepares the students, there is an onus on students to go out on their placement and work there, to do business there, but do it in a very reflective, a very evaluative way, not just going out there and doing the job, but going out there and thinking and also thinking about how what you are doing there can link back into your academic activities and other modules."

"I think, it's providing an opportunity for students to put their learning in a particular context and hopefully to be able to examine, or take their examinations of some of the conceptual material into a new area. A marriage of the theory and the practice."

- An opportunity for students to experience 'actual' political environments

"I think probably from my perspective it is about engaging the politics students by showing them real life politics, getting them involved. It is not just getting them into the work, but getting them to actually

become involved and go on the placements, and hopefully for a research project, but not always the case I think on each placement it is not always possible, but ensuring that during the placement they actually work as though they are a part of that organisation and understand the context of that organisation within the political world and some of the more interesting ones I think have been in the NGOs, because the student has perhaps struggled a bit more, or had to dig a bit deeper to look at the political context of where they are working."

- An opportunity for students to have an enriched and challenging experience in a practice-based environment

"To me, it offered a sense of vitality to our programme, to our students, it enlivened the curriculum in a way that couldn't just be done around what we currently did, it offered an added extra. I think unless you think about it in terms of..... what are the pedagogies of learning?I just thought that this would be a very good thing to do. It seemed natural to me to allow students that type of experience."

"In a positive way, because I think it is an excellent scheme of opportunities for undergraduate students to actually do a bit of placement alongside their degree to get to grips with the sort of experience and about what they are learning, and see how it works in real life, which I think is probably a lot of what is missing from degrees."

- An opportunity to enhance students' employability by expanding their understanding of relevant occupational contexts, make contacts and procure relevant pre-professional experience for CV purposes

"I think it is allowing dimension to the educational experience of students, particularly for the politics and social science students which certainly at this stage was something that didn't exist before, so I think it is about developing knowledge, all those sorts of areas for the students that have this experience, so Ihave a very clear focus on employability. It is about the quality of the students, it is about the quality of feeding our graduating students into careers. I probably see it at a slightly different level because I am not one of the tutors teaching on politics. It is about raising standards and raising qualities for employability."

Embedded in these conceptions are rather different justifications for his kind of activity. On the one hand is a more generic purpose associated with insights into professional practice as a form of 'preparation' for future careers; on the other is a more academic justification concerned with furthering students' capacities as researchers and enlivening their appreciation of key concepts from the discipline of politics by their contextualisation in an organisational setting.

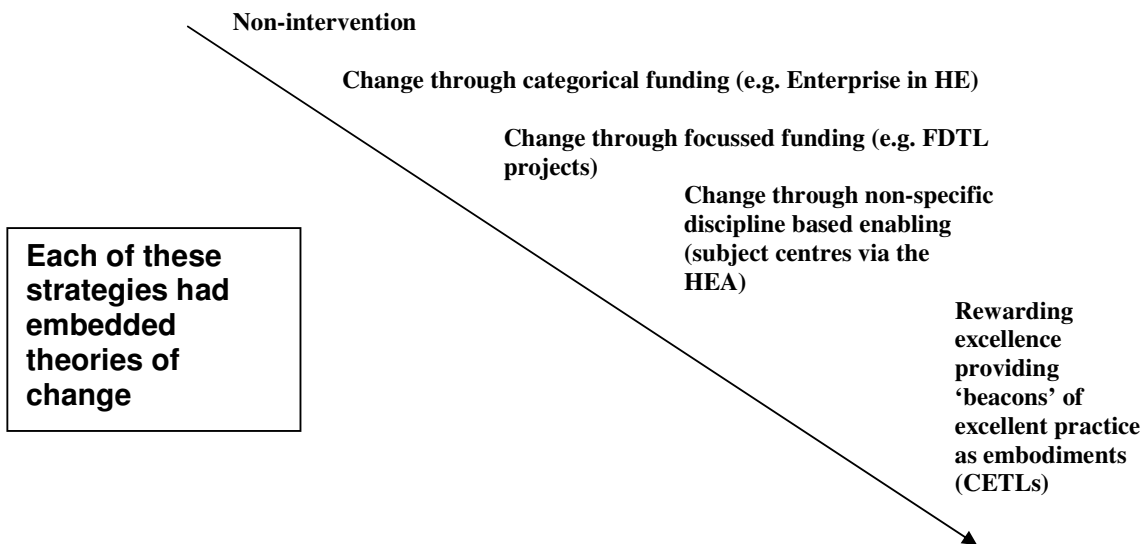
Either way, the project was universally seen as an opportunity to experiment and try out the feasibility of presenting students with placement opportunities that potentially combined a number of purposes put succinctly in the following extract:

"...it provides, well there are 3 dimensions to it, one is that it is provides an opportunity to bring insights from the academic study pockets in international relations to something approximate to real life, work based experience and to some extent vice versa as well because of the way students can resource their work from their experience of placement. Secondly that these experiences are a relatively novel take upon the idea of teaching and learning strategies and locations, and that thirdly in the process of doing these things there are likely to be benefits from the employability aspect in a number of ways. One that I thought of is obviously making a CV stand out from other CVs by saying that you have done this sort of thing and two, there may be particular skills of a generic kind derived from working closely with other people to a deadline that quite often can't be shifted. Other particular skills in relation to things like report writing, desk research....I suppose it is a combination of both instrumental elements of the advantages of a more expressive dimension in terms of opening up the learning experience."

4.0 Strategic dimensions of the project

As an FDTL project, SofE can be understood as a mechanism to further government's policy interest in developing enriching and improving the quality of teaching and learning within the HE sector. Notwithstanding the imputed motivation for this policy interest, which is of course contested, the development of policy in this area can be depicted graphically (see fig 1 below) to show that various policy instruments have been used. It is of interest then to interpret the way the interview group understood the project strategically, in particular, how the project might be used on a broader front as a lever or change mechanism to encourage developments in the use of placements for undergraduate learning.

Figure 1: HE change strategies since mid 20th Century



Having said this, there is no doubt that part of the strategic dimension is how the project was located in the personal trajectories of key members of the interview group, in particular, those who had responsibility for its implementation. All those interviewed, occupying this position, were positive about the opportunities the project has offered and the professional interest participation in the project had engendered.

"I think it is important and strategic in many senses. Personally for me it has been important. For my career it has been important, it has been good to meet people and to network, it has offered me opportunities that wouldn't have happened otherwise. In part that has been down to the options of being involved in a bigger project. For the discipline it has been helpful but I would say in the same sense that we are not the only people who have every done this, and there are other people who have done it, but it has been good because generally speaking it has offered an excellent contrast, if you like, between working from home or being in laboratory all day, buried in text books. I think there can be implications within the subject, 'we teach you light because you have got to read a lot'...they are getting their hands dirty but not really dirty, they are not really uncovering things unless they know about it themselves and I think what is good about this strategically is that it shook their heads up if you like."

"I think that is one of the reasons that I am so enthusiastic about the job, is I think that you can be enthusiastic about a job anyway if you enjoy it, and if you believe in it, and I think having seen the students I have actually become very fond of all the students we have worked with because they have been literally, every one of them, has been positive..... There is nothing more to get you enthused about something than it actually working and the students really gaining something, so it is actually something you can see and feel. The nice thing is that you don't have to make it up and say: oh, I thought it was great!"

Wider effects however, are more difficult to assess. To some extent the project remains at an 'enclave' stage where respondents estimate the gains made in the experience of students (see next section) have been confined to those directly taking part. In an important sense this may be a matter of timing. Exemplars of good or interesting practice do take time to percolate through a system and this project has not had time to stabilise its practices... But, what are the views of this interview group on the extent to which the project has had strategic or systemic effects at the level of department, school/faculty, and other areas of the curriculum or at institutional levels?

At departmental level, the story is mixed.

"We had a bit of a talk about that earlier. I think yes and no. I think departmentally I haven't been aware of it, but there hasn't really often been a strong departmental culture in terms of meeting on a monthly basis, how are things going xxxxxx with the project, is there something we can do in other areas. Is that a criticism of me, that I could have done more? But I think it is also a criticism on the head of department."

I haven't set the meetings, I haven't set the agenda, I have asked for them but nothing has happened, so I think that is potentially a criticism."

The interviews suggest that a critical factor may be associated with the position of the project advocates. In the case above, a direct line of leverage was not present, although the orientation of the project was congruent with a new university strategy that emphasised applied research and employability. In other cases, the project is 'known and supported' by advocates who are directly involved within faculty or school and department and who can position the learning potential of the project to strategic effect.

The evidence from these interviews suggests that the experience of the project in the three collaborating institutions from the strategic point of view was varied. In one case it (the experience of the project) can be depicted as relatively limited and connected to 'employability' rather than a research or academic agenda. In another case, it was well supported at the institutional level having congruence with an orientation toward employers yet also emphasising the 'academic' learning potential for students. It should be remembered that there is nothing logically or contingently problematic about having these purposes running concurrently.

"xxxxxxx has always been very interested in employer engagement and it has always been quite good at it in certain specific areas, in particular engineering, but also some of the other departments got interested about this and were broadening the idea of our placement in employer engagement activity in all areas, and also probably doing things in a rather different way from what come to be referred to as the 'academicised' placement in some sort of theory emerging in practice."

"The key things that we as a university in terms of our teaching and learning strategy are keen to push and employer engagement, to push placements, which have been patchy, or significant parts of the university placements are, so the attraction was – right, we can do something."

"It provides a good exemplar of practice, very much feeding into our focus on improving the quality of learning and teaching. We are phasing in a new student booklet, a student learning experience strategy and schools are taking that up. So it is a solid example within that which probably, with the funds that the FDTL, it provides an impetus, so we might have been able to do this over a longer period, but this is actually speeding up the process, enabling that particular example to have an effect, it might take us a lot longer and whether it would happen might actually come down to driving force of staff, time, availability, other resources."

Other strategic issues centre on the collaborative nature of the project that brings together three HE institutions, which, while having a history of collaborative activity, have different aspirations, cultures and direction. The project has had the benefit of providing a mix of skills and experience

enabling all participants to gain on an equal footing. Useful connections have also been made with the Reinvention Centre, a CETL involving a congruent orientation on teaching and learning. This strategy of clustering 'like-minded' embodiments of change within teaching and learning improvements can build on the momentum to create 'tipping points' in which more sustained shifts in practice are given legitimacy.

As ever however, there are interesting sustainability issues concerning the creation of enclaves or 'pilots' of good practice that provide scaled down embodiments of interesting or desirable activity. Once project status ends, dedicated funding ceases and the momentum created by focused interactions ebbs away, to what extent has the project created the conditions to embed new practices? One important issue confronting SofE, is how placement practice, of the reflective and research-based kind it advocates, might be scaled up. To find engagement placements on a wide scale for all students as some kind of 'entitlement' poses almost insurmountable problems at an institutional level.

"If one is thinking about sustainability, then there is a whole issue about how we can scale this, because numbers have been small and that is okay, but if there was an entitlement, say, to any fixed any department, if there was an entitlement fixed to everybody's faculty then it becomes very difficult to manage, so it has to be an opportunity and as a university we are okay about this and we have got an undergraduate research scholarship scheme which the Reinvention Centre are closely involved in."

If this kind of placement experience is not an 'entitlement' then it becomes an 'opportunity' and new issues emerge. On what basis might such opportunities be distributed for example? The way in which this project is used strategically, then, is perhaps the biggest challenge going forward. More specific issues can also be the subject of complex design challenges if presented on an institutional basis. For example, the extract below addresses the problem of the structure of a modular based approach and how placement practice might fit into it:

"I will give you one example of this. Most of these, in fact I think I am right in saying, all of the, the basic building blocks for the degree is a 20 credit module. However, the employability modules are 10 credit modules, so students can build up a much more a kind of credit accumulation basis. However, if you have got a placement over an extended period of time, how do you fit that into a short, 10-credit module? It is not easily done, so what we have tried to do is to negotiate and navigate around this to some extent to say well, look, can we badge what we want to do as one of these kind of skills/employability modules."

5.0 Effects on teaching and learning

Projects of this kind generate expectations of change that can be wildly optimistic. Effects are often demanded of relatively small-scale interventions

that are disproportionate both in terms of resource, reach and timing. This section outlines the perspectives of the interview group in terms of emerging estimations of where the project has begun to create effects on themselves, and on the context in which it has taken place.

For the staff involved, the central idea of engagement has opened up new possibilities for teaching and learning approaches within the subject area. Allowing students more 'undirected' space to make connections between concepts and practice, to experience practice environments as a learning resource and to address the challenge of developing curricular designs and assessments that do justice to this more open approach are among the positive effects reported by the interviewees.

"I think there are a lot contributions. What it is doing for the staff themselves who are involved with in that, and colleagues within the department, it is producing what may be for some people a completely new approach to learning and teaching, placements not being part of politics in the past. We are seeing those individuals plus the wider school and university discussing that, wider pedagogic approaches. We ask questions – is this something we want more students to do and what the benefits from this are."

"Speaking from a personal perspective, it has really raised my consciousness of these possibilities in a way that I simply hadn't thought about previously. I think it's beginning to have that effect also upon the perceptions of my colleagues at the institution. There may be different experiences in the other 2 institutions, I am not sure. So that the whole profile of the idea, not just the reserve of this project, but the whole profile of the idea of placement learning is now much higher than it was".

In this sense, 'effects of the project' emerge in its capacity to capture new **practices-in-waiting**. This term might be useful in designating a change dimension that focuses on practices that have emerged during a project but which have yet to be entirely stabilised in a routine embedded context. To that extent, members of this interview group were able to identify potentialities as effects.

"I would say that a good legacy is that it demonstrates that we don't have to have students with us like a nursery; they are responsible individuals and we have got to trust them. The academic staff can sometimes forget that they were an undergraduate or that they wanted a degree and we can get lost in the fact that there aren't enough resources, and actually not really think about what is the student trying to learn, what are they trying to do, are they trying to improve their own understanding of the subject. Hopefully in some senses, the project maybe challenges some of those pre-set views."

Effects on students are outlined in detail in other parts of this evaluation; members of this group were unanimous in their positive estimation of its direct effects on students who had participated. Among the key phrases to emerge from the interviews are:

- It enlivened the students' experience
- It connected concepts with practices
- It changed their perspectives
- They seemed much more motivated
- Students were excited by the experience
- It enabled them to make a contribution

6.0 Learning points and futures

The way that the project has been managed was a topic for discussion within the context of project learning. I will mention this area briefly here. Overall, the responses of the interview group suggest that their experience was very positive. From a staffing point of view the progress of the project has posed some real challenges. Early administrative change and the serious illness of the project director might have derailed the project. However, respondents report that while progress may have been quicker during the second quarter of the project, the fact that the replacement administrator was able to go beyond her administrative duties and develop a real feel for the substantive dimensions of placement learning was considered to be a considerable bonus.

This and the 'distant' support provided continuously to the administrator by the director while on sick leave, with other the key members of the steering group stepping up and providing leadership, has meant the negative impact of these unforeseen events has been minimised. Apart from the personal dimension, respondents were able to identify the intrinsic interest in the aims of the project as a factor in their capacity to address these problems and "go the extra mile".

The support and interest of the HEA link person was also identified as a useful dimension in managing through this period. Other issues raised under this broad category of consideration concerned the IT dimension. The main learning point here related to how to maximise the effects of a dedicated IT person and the relationship between the technical and substantive content in WEB use. This is a perennial issue. The project included excellent technical expertise but some respondents suggested that use of the web resource still required active and continuous research and academic involvement and integration. Understandably, they argued, this active involvement was not always present, due to some extent to the way in which resources were allocated.

Importantly, the work of the project has been able to act as a springboard for onward developments. This has varied between the participating institutions.

Oxford Brookes has used the momentum of the project to offer placement opportunities to a wider group of students (in law, sociology and anthropology) and to consider how a modular response might incorporate placement experience. In Warwick, placement learning is congruent with its strategic direction and is well supported institutionally with a view to exporting placement experience from where it has traditionally a strong base to less obvious curricular areas, in the social sciences for example. The initiative has the benefit of strong synergies and links with the Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research, the CETL based on collaborative links between Warwick and Oxford Brookes.

In Coventry the effects appear to be more 'enclaved' but placement learning has a strong tradition in the institution and the experience of SofE of moving into areas of the curriculum less associated with placement learning, may well act as a resource in the longer term.

The interview group saw dissemination now as critical and cited events that had already taken place both within institutions and wider a field.

Some of the specific learning points from the project that focused on placement learning include the following:

- The excitement and enthusiasm generated by non-standard learning environments (placement) for students, providing impetus for study and motivation of a more general kind
- The importance of careful preparation and integration into course aims
- The challenge of integrating placement learning into a modular framework
- The challenge posed by designing a research or inquiry dimension within placement (this issue balances the design of an inquiry strongly associated with academic curricular aims on the one hand, which might involve research training, with the needs or interests of the placement employers, who may or may not wish to pursue such purposes)
- The challenge of designing assessment processes for placement learning (this again involves a balance between more 'hard-nosed' assessment procedures based on academic criteria with more 'process' oriented learning gains which are much harder to pin down)
- As I mention above, perhaps the biggest challenge in the wider adoption of placement learning opportunities will be the prosaic problem of finding, nurturing and keeping good quality placements on a massive scale in domains and occupational areas without a tradition of placement activity.

Appendix 1.1: the interview schedule

Discussion Schedule: Scholarship of Engagement Interviews with For use by interviewers

<p>Name of interviewer: Date: Time: Place: Name of interviewee (will be confidential and is not compulsory): (Please use this grid for notes) Philip Martin</p>
<p>Introductory remarks to be used by interviewers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• This discussion is part of the formative evaluation of SCHOLARSHIP OF ENGAGEMENT• The purpose of the discussion is to feedback to learn more about its processes, see if there are problems, see where it has strong points and to help plan for the future• It is confidential• It will last for about 30 minutes or less• There will be 6 issues to discuss• We are interested in your own views and experience and hope you can be open and frank
<p>1. Tell me a little about your responsibilities in</p> <p>Prompts</p> <p>How long have you been with or connected to ?</p> <p>Were you involved in the preparation of the SCHOLARSHIP OF ENGAGEMENT bid in any way?</p> <p>2. What is SCHOLARSHIP OF ENGAGEMENT about?</p> <p>Prompts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tell me a little about what you understand SCHOLARSHIP OF ENGAGEMENT to be about?• What do you think its main aims are?• Why do you think the work in this area within was considered excellent?• Can you characterise what you think is distinctive about SCHOLARSHIP OF ENGAGEMENT?

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you think its main strengths are?
<p>3. What are your views concerning SCHOLARSHIP OF ENGAGEMENT within</p> <p>Prompts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you tell me a little about the broad T&L strategies of ? • How did you see SCHOLARSHIP OF ENGAGEMENT making a contribution? • Do you have a sense of what the strategic issues are with Projects like SCHOLARSHIP OF ENGAGEMENT? What are the priorities for you?
<p>4. SCHOLARSHIP OF ENGAGEMENT's effects</p> <p>Prompts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has the existence of SCHOLARSHIP OF ENGAGEMENT helped or contributed to the development of 's teaching and learning strategy? • Are there any emerging effects on the following as far as you can see: <p>Teaching strategies Curriculum designs Connections with practice Connections with other communities/institutions/networks What the students are doing?</p>
<p>5. What are the longer term futures for SCHOLARSHIP OF ENGAGEMENT?</p> <p>Prompts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resourcing issues • Knock on effects • How does rewarding excellence work in your view? <p>Any drawbacks</p>
<p>6. Are there ways in which the impact of SCHOLARSHIP OF ENGAGEMENT might be improved in the future?</p>

Appendix 2

The Scholarship of Engagement for Politics

Placement Debriefing: Record of Student Interview

Name of Student:

Placement Provider:

Round: 1 / 2 / 3 (*delete as applicable*)

Why did you apply to undertake a placement through this project?

What were your expectations of the placement before it began and what did you hope to gain?

Which activities were you involved in on the placement?

Did you find these activities stimulating and enjoyable?

Related to the module in which you placement occurred, which concepts or theories or themes did you recognise during your placement?

Did your placement experience challenge your understanding and appreciation of those concepts or theories or themes?

In what ways was your placement experience relevant to your wider academic studies in Politics, in terms of areas you have already studied?

How do you feel this learning will enhance / support your further academic studies and your future career needs?

Was there any aspect of the placement you didn't like (either didn't enjoy or didn't find useful as a learning experience)?

Did you feel adequately prepared for the placement (in terms of both your personal previous experience and the briefing provided by the universities)?

Is there anything you would have liked to be done differently (e.g., longer placement, different organisation of placement, different activities, better supervision, use of Blog)?

Would you recommend this form of placement learning to students in the future?

Appendix 3

The Scholarship of Engagement for Politics

**Placement Debriefing:
Record of Placement Provider Experience**

Placement Provider:

Name of Contact at PP:

Name(s) of Student:

Round:

Thank you for taking the above student(s) on placement. As placement provider, did you find it a worthwhile experience?

Have you provided placements or internships for students in the past? If so, how does this form of placement compare?

Could the student(s) have been better prepared for the placement?

Specifically could we have provided skills training to the student in any particular area to help prepare them for the placement?

Is there anything the universities could have done better (to prepare students and provide support for placements)?

To what extent did you find it useful having a student studying politics placed with you?

Did you see a change in the student during the placement?

Are you willing and able to take students on placements in the future?

- how many students at a time: 1 / 2
- which rounds:
 - Round 2 (Oct – Dec 06)
 - Round 3 (Jan – Apr 07)
 - Post-project placements (Oct 08 onwards)
- on what basis: one day a week for 5/6 weeks / as a block

Appendix 4

Post-Placement Student Questionnaire

Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	1. I found the placement helped my understanding of politics.
Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	2. The placement did not really connect with what we had done on the course.
Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	3. I was able to use my experience of placement in assignments.
Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	4. I was able to use my experience of placement in class discussions.
Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	5. I was able to apply some key concepts and theories while on placement.
Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	6. What I learned on placement was directly relevant to my course.
Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	7. My studies in politics became more relevant after the placement.
Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	8. The method of assessment focused me on the politics of my placement.
Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	9. I gained unexpected benefits from the placement.
Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	10. My experience at University has been enriched by my placement.
Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	11. I learned a lot on placement.
Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	12. Being on placement really stretched me.
Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	13. I made some valuable contacts on my placement.
Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	14. I feel better prepared for work after my placement.
Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	15. I gained skills that I think will be useful when I begin work.
Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	16. The placement has influenced my career aspirations.
Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	17. The impact of placement has exceeded my expectations.

Appendix 5

The Construction and Development of the Scholarship of Engagement Project Website

A suitable site address was required for the project website, and after much discussion www.scholarshipofengagement.ac.uk was agreed upon. However, as the website for the project was being created at Oxford Brookes University, the Universal Resource Locator (URL) suggested for the site had to be applied for, and approved through, the university's web services procedures as well as the United Kingdom Education and Research Networking Association (UKERNA). As this would take some time, it was done at the start.

The project team primarily required a website for the Scholarship of Engagement for Politics project, which is one of five Frameworks for the Development of Learning and Teaching (FDLT) projects in the area of Politics alone. The main concern was that the site should be user friendly, used in part of the project dissemination, as well as providing useful resources. A search of other subject related sites coupled with some specific site addresses provided by the team, were researched to assess their user friendliness and note any other facilities that the site could offer, so that some baseline suggestions could be set for the new site. There were certain facilities that were already known to be required for the site, such as FDLT project information, information about other FDLT institutions, and on-line resources for students, the team, and placement providers. However, the site also needed to be flexible enough to accommodate any changing resource needs, as and when they arose.

The websites retrieved from the searches were examined for content, page structure, navigation, readability, performance, and user friendliness. Any other useful facilities were also noted. A short review of these sites produced a template of suggested requirements for the new site, with proposed ideas for the menu content, page structure and navigation of the site, all to be as user friendly as possible and to be set as a baseline for the content and style for the site. From this a proposed site structure was drawn, and sent around to all team members for further comments.

More research into the top fifty placement learning sites was investigated for evidence of information concerning their placement learning methods and the degree of student interactivity within Politics and International Relations sites. Only a few sites had notable interactivity within them. It was felt that interactivity was important within the proposed site, to engage users, gather information, provide online information, and generally help to hold the users' interest longer.

A logo had already been created for the project, consisting of interlocking circles. This looked rather nice, and was intended to be used, until it was found too large to use on the website. The inclusion of this logo within the page template overwhelmed the page, due to its size, however a reduction in size just resulted in distortion. A team member also suggested that we could have the logo circles moving on an opening page. After a long discussion with the University Web Administrator, we considered this idea to have accessibility issues, due to using a required plug in for viewing. Even if the issue of logo size was addressed, there were also restrictions by

the universities as to the use of their university logos with the amount of white space surrounding them. Although interactivity on site was considered important, it was felt that accessibility was more a priority for the home page; instead any interactivity would be contained within specific site areas.

Using the suggested menu for the site (from the research), several templates were created using the original logo, just to give an idea of the layout the team preferred, and to consider suitable colours. Homepage layouts had differing designs, with either the menu arranged vertically down the left, or set horizontally across the top of the main text area. At an October 2005 team meeting a questionnaire was talked through and some decisions made:

- Website page template chosen, adapted from a similar page in the Warwick site design, using blue & red, with a plain background.
- Circles logo: too large, idea of circles good as it suggests a bonding of universities. Also issues of logo sizes, and, if interactive, accessibility issues to be further discussed.
- Additions to the proposed 1st level menu: placement areas, team members area (materials & templates), and a publications area. Original Hot Tips suggestion replaced by News & Events.
- Suggestions for 2nd level menu pages (FAQs adjoined to each area, Research – current research projects, News & Events – Conferences & Seminars, Resources – HE Project Community Area Books & Periodicals and development materials).

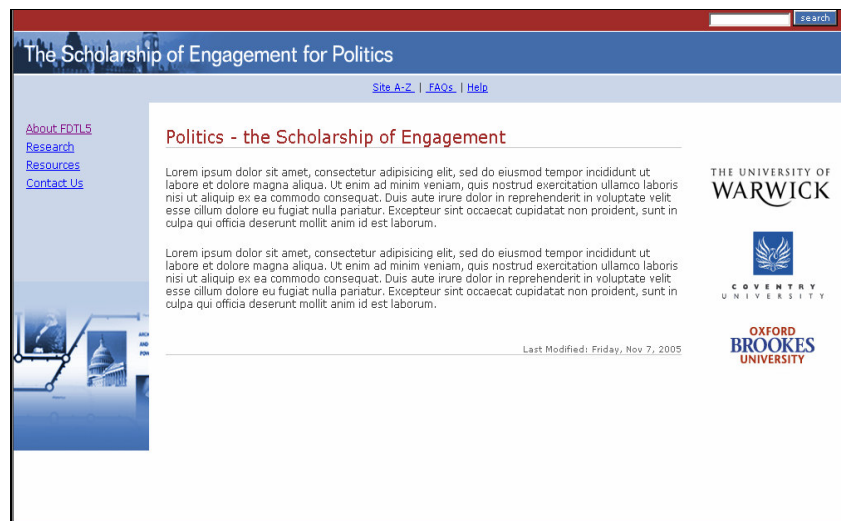


Fig 1: Draft example of first-level page structure

Finally the first-level page structure was decided upon. The design was chosen, but the menu was to be updated, and it was felt that all of the menu should be on the left hand side to allow more content space, and give less confusion to users. The new *Scholarship of Engagement for Politics* logo would appear on the top right hand side above all the university logos, once created.

The new *Scholarship of Engagement for Politics* logo was designed to reflect the colours used in this template, using blue, dark red and black, with the original idea of

a circular form kept. Editable regions were created within certain areas of the web pages, with the idea that the site will eventually be used alongside Contribute, and that other users can update certain page areas, without affecting the site functionality. The original site address URL (www.scholarshipofengagement.ac.uk) was turned down, as being too long, and another proposed site address www.politics-soe.ac.uk was then put forward, which was accepted by Oxford Brookes University, but turned down by UKERNA. Eventually team decided on www.politicsinaction.ac.uk, which was eventually accepted by both parties.



Fig 2: Updated first-level menu structure - incorporation all suggestions



Fig 3: Suggested format for second-level menu structure

The page format for the second level of the site was designed in a similar way to the first, so as to give a familiar feel for the user. The left hand menu structure remained the same, whilst the university logos on the right hand side were removed and replaced by a *Scholarship of Engagement for Politics* logo, below which was a topical menu for each second level link.

From the October meeting, after much discussion, most of the second level site pages were named. So the website areas were re-structured to reflect these changes.

From this a second level proposed site structure was drawn and sent around to all team members for their comments. Comments and feedback from the proposed second level site plan were added to create a new site plan.

At first all pages were filled with text in Latin, as the site pages looked so bare whilst awaiting content. Site content was added using existing project documents, suggestions from the team or research. The site structure developed in an organic manner, and additional pages were created if deemed necessary and then placed in the most appropriate site area according to their content. It was likely that further site restructuring would be required, as the needs and requirements from the team were addressed as and when they arose, resulting in some site areas being overcrowded.

The team members also required a secure section of the site for materials and documents, so a password protected area of the server was set up and all the secure material was moved there.

Interactivity was still very important, and the placement students video clips of their experiences do just this. However due to the occasional naming within these clips of the placement members, it was felt that in order to protect both students and the providers, that these clips should be used only as a team members resource, and stored securely within the secure area of the site. It was considered a little risky to have a direct link to the blogs from the site, even if password protected, due to the very sensitive material contained within the blog area. The student blogs are another interactive area of the project site, and although not actually linked to the site, are controlled alongside, and the edited results are input onto the site. Further interactivity was considered by adding video clips of the students' experiences, although any other ideas will be discussed in depth. A balance needs to be maintained between accessibility (inclusion for all students, whether disabled in some way, or with old and slow computers), interactivity (some to entertain and engage, but not too much to increase our liability), and confidentiality to ensure we harm no persons or company on this site.

The Help area of the site was created to support the user. The main Help page described several methods to access your required information. Links to the A to Z page provided direct access to a clickable list of important documents and resources. The FAQs page answered relevant questions concerning all areas of the project.

The university had purchased a search engine tool, to enable searches for documents and pages within the site, however this wasn't working as it should, so was still under test. The site content was now almost complete, prior to its launch – although the final date had yet to be decided upon.

Additional site areas were found to be necessary, so these were added as required. Although the search box was still a problem, as it didn't seem to be accessing the various known documents within the site, this facility was removed prior to the launch.

The launch date was finally agreed on as 1st June 2006, as the site (public area view) was ready. But due to some unforeseen problems with UKERNA, we didn't actually go live until mid-month, after which announcements accompanied by email flyers

were then made to interested parties. From that moment on, the search box functionality was tested and suddenly started to work properly.



Fig 4: The Home page after launch (level 1) at 010806:

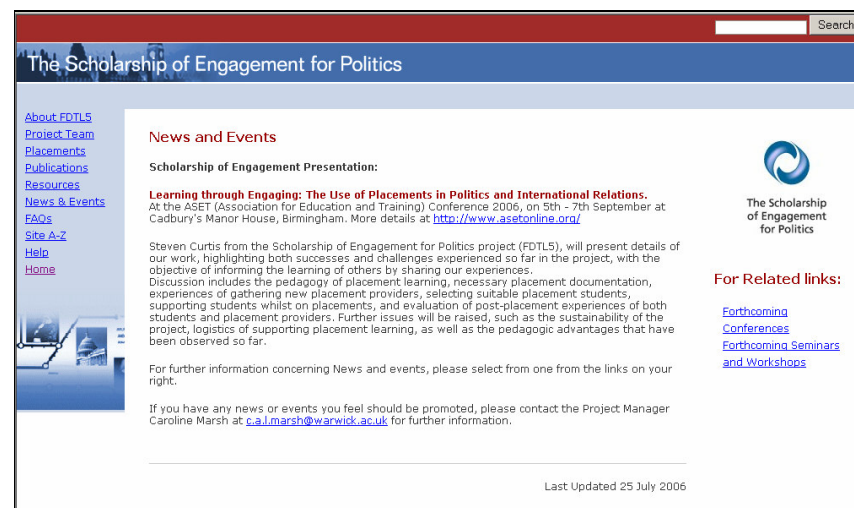


Fig 5: Example of News and Events main page (level 2) on 010806:

Now that the team area was created, and password protected to provide a measure of security, this area was now arranged according to what the team intended to put in it. The team required:

- Placement documents, in both both pdf and word (Template_files).
- An area for all the students on placements' resources, eg blogs, images, placement debriefing doc, and interviews (placement_resources).
- A separate area for student video clips, due to their size (video_clips).
- A team reflective page was included, in which thoughts from individual team members concerning the project were written (team_evaluation).
- A page for records of student feedback materials from pre-placement sessions (student_placement_data).
- A page for presentation material used by the team for dissemination and marketing purposes (Project_Presentations).



Fig 6: The Secure Team area home page on 010806:

As the content and resource materials on the site increased, the placement area of the website in particular had all documents for students and placement providers alike within the same area. It was felt by some that this could become confusing, however separating the placement area made documents that were used by both parties awkward to place.

Research into other placement sites on the web, as to what they offered and how they organised their resources, suggested alternative ways of organising the placement resources. The most user friendliest sites separated the area into individual Students and Placement Providers areas, ensuring the correct use of each documents. Any documents that were to be used by both parties would be included in both areas. After presenting this research at the team meeting, the team agreed that a reorganisation of the placement area would be beneficial. Separate areas were agreed, and the placement area was re-organised to provide specific areas for the student placement documents, and the placement provider documents. Some other ideas also found whilst researching were also considered and agreed by the team: the copyright page, to define our terms and conditions for the use of the templates; an online feedback form, to enable feedback from site users; and most importantly, a site counter to assess the number of users to the site. A new site structure was drawn to reflect these changes.

An on-line form was implemented for the site, by creating an account with www.surveymonkey.com. The SurveyMonkey site allows you to create an on-line form, of a maximum ten questions, and will allow a maximum of one hundred replies for a free account. The code provided from the site is embedded into the web page, providing a link so that site users are linked to an online form, and their responses are stored and accessed on Survey Monkeys' server. If more than one hundred responses are likely, another account could be created. A suggested list of questions was sent to the team, which was agreed, and this account was created using the step by step process on the site. User survey responses were checked on the SurveyMonkey web site at regular intervals.

A copyright page was created, agreed by the team, and then linked to the bottom of the front page. Also an account for a free on-line counter was set up at

www.StatCounter.com. After choosing a counter design (we picked an invisible counter), the code provided by the site was embedded into the homepage. The StatCounter site allowed me to log-in on their site and view detailed web traffic information for the *Scholarship of Engagement for Politics* site. The results were examined monthly, both as a graph and table, and sent monthly to the team as well as being published to the Web Stats page within the team secure area.

The project director felt that the homepage required a larger logo, so as to create a bigger impact. The *Scholarship of Engagement for Politics* small logo from the right hand side was then removed, and all of the university logos moved up. An enlarged version of the *Scholarship of Engagement for Politics* logo was then placed in the central area of the homepage, with student quotes alongside.



Fig 7: Revised home page showing larger SOE image

The resources area of the site was also not felt to be quite as specific as it could be, so a decision from the team to hire a dedicated researcher to research all material concerning placements, education and related themes was agreed.

Due to many enquiries from other universities, the project director felt that we should offer an Academic Template page for all other academic institutions interested in creating a framework within their own institutions and who wanted to use the project templates as a basis. The Academic Templates page was created to fulfil this request, providing an overall guide to the placement process from both the student and placement provider perspective, detailing the process of application with the specific documents and project templates. This was added as a link to the main placement area.

As the project was now drawing to a close (July 2007), the director then considered how we should leave the site on the web after the project had finished. It was felt that it would be a good idea to refresh both the site design and content by using a new design format. The site would look revitalised, as well as users gaining a more direct access to valuable project templates, materials and resources.

From several design options provided to the team, a specific format was chosen. The central text area of the page was bordered by vertical coloured margins, (the colour of which reflected the inside colour of the *Scholarship of Engagement for Politics* logo). These margins, it was felt by the team, helped to focus the user's eye to the central content of the page. An image was created as a header, which incorporated the team logo and enlarged text, and was placed across the top of the central area as a banner. The main menu structure ran vertically on the left hand side of the white central area, and consisted of a column of individual buttons. These buttons were created by reducing the size of the project logo and incorporating text as part of the image, each button linked to its specific area within the site.



Fig 8: Homepage for the new design SOE

From the first level structure (homepage), access to the second level site structure was by using the left hand menu buttons, where the user was taken to the main page for that specific topic area. Within each topic area, the main page contained an explanation of resources offered within that area, with links to appropriate pages. A breadcrumb menu was included across the main text area, within the second level structure, to enable the user to return back.



Fig 9: Placements main page – showing second level structure for the new design SOE

The re-design of the site was also felt to be an ideal opportunity to refine both the contents of the original site and also its structure. It was also felt that the original site had grown very large in certain areas and occasionally required many user clicks to access certain materials. If the site contents were restructured, it could ensure a reduction in the number of mouse clicks from the user to reach her goal, allowing better accessibility.

The team agreed on the essential content of the proposed site. The new site menu was created with contents of: Placements, Resources, About Us, Site A to Z, Help and Home. Some menu contents from the old site were not included in the new site design, as it was felt that they were not relevant anymore – considering that the project’s placements had concluded. A proposed site diagram was then sent to members of the team for approval.

The menu areas from the old site that were not used within the new site are:

- Project team – although the text for the team members’ biographies was retained and moved into the new site About Us area, the rest was not used.
- The Publication area was also removed, as this area on the new site will be accessed from within the Resources area and used solely for the *Scholarship of Engagement for Politics* publication.
- The News and Events section was also removed, as it was felt that this area wasn’t relevant now that the project placement lifecycle had completed all rounds, and no new publicity of events would be required; however the FDTL Workshop page was relocated to the About Us area within the new site.
- The original Resources page contents were also removed, saving only the HE Project Community Area for inclusion into the new site, within About Us.

For the new site, the new Placements area now includes: Academic Department Templates, the Placement Student Process, and the Placement Provider Process. All content information used for these pages was taken from the old site. For each Placements area, the information was condensed to hold all the most relevant and up

to date information – on one page. A new Placement Supporting Documents page was created within the Placements area, to reference and provide supporting documentation for other interested academic departments.

The new Resources area includes, a new Publication page for the final *Scholarship of Engagement for Politics* publication, and further new pages created specifically for the researchers' results - within Placement Research area. The Placement Research page contains information on the groups of placements researched, each linked to pages containing further details of notable papers in each field.

The new About Us area contains the SOE Project objectives, details of the FDTL Workshop, the Project Team Members (with shorter biographies – all on one page, with links to relevant universities), the SOE Project background, and the Higher Education Project Community area page. All content for these pages was used from the old site. The secure team members' area is accessed from within the Project Team Members' page.

The new Site A to Z page retains similar content as on the original site, and can be used for speedy and direct access to all documents within the site.

The new Help area contains an adapted version from the old site. The Home page is also listed on the main menu, so as to allow the user to link back to the home page, from anywhere on the site, and so was felt to be essential.

The secure Team Members' area is accessed from the Project Team Members page, within the About Us menu area. The team area contents are Placement Data – for both students and providers whilst in placements, Placement resources – for round one, two, and three of the placements, a Team Events page – showing all dissemination events, team reflections, and dissemination resources. The contents from all these pages were taken from the old site. A new Calendar of Team Events page was created to incorporate all dates from the original site – calendar pages each month, condensed into one page for team reference. The contents of the original site's Web Statistics page was also included in the new site, within the Dissemination Resources page.

A visual interactive diagram was also developed (using SVG) as a visual flow chart showing the document order within the placement process. This works fine in Mozilla, and can also be viewed in Internet Explorer with the use of an Adobe plugin. The Visual flow chart is linked from within the Academic Templates page. At present a security setting within Internet Explorer blocks the interaction, although a page refresh will trigger the link to work. Research into this problem is aiming to rectify this problem.

As soon as all the team are completely happy with the new site design and content, it will go live to replace the old design.