

2012

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Rooke, S.

Rooke, S., and Lamb, G. (2012) 'Work placements as research-based learning a student and employer perspective', *The Plymouth Student Scientist*, 5(2), p. 1-3.

<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/13978>

The Plymouth Student Scientist

University of Plymouth

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Work placements as research-based learning – a student and employer perspective

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Research based learning – a student's perspective

When considering the options available to me for my third year dissertation I decided to explore the possibility of a work placement. I am passionate about the need to recycle and enjoy practical and field work. I wished to apply my current environmental science knowledge of sustainability and recycling and gain insight into the role of an Environment and Recycling Officer; take an active role in fieldwork surveys and use my data and analysis skills.

I was conscious that I also had to be an ambassador for Plymouth University. My CV and enquiry letter had to be tailored to the organisations I was applying to work with and this had to be well researched. I was interviewed by the Environmental Recycling Officer of Bournemouth Borough Council at their depot and was able to discuss my personal goals which also provided her with an opportunity to structure the placement to help me achieve these. All personnel dealing with waste management were based at the depot including the refuse and recycling collectors and the wagons. The recycling team were interested in undertaking a pilot participation scheme and I was able to suggest how this might be able to be carried out based on my previous experience. What I did not know then was the scale of the pilot survey they had in mind which involved handling and analysing data for 14,659 households. It was also critical to understand and agree all the related safety work instructions and risk assessments because of the nature of the work.

In parallel with my placement the recycling team were launching a consultation on the Bournemouth Municipal Waste Management Strategy to promote and implement sustainable waste management. The team were incredibly busy so after initial introductions I had to work on my own initiative which was challenging for me.

Although I am very determined and committed to tasks I learned that I need sometimes to take a step back and review and reprioritise my work. I pushed myself too hard in the first week as I was keen to make a good impression and became frustrated that I would not complete all the preparation for the surveys on my own. It was critical to be well prepared for the first survey as this would set the standard for the whole survey. The monitors assisting me needed a clear

understanding and to have confidence in what they were doing and why. This was a new challenge for me and I focused on encouraging, motivating and thanking them. I made sure I kept in touch with them throughout the surveys and supported them with any problems that needed resolving.

I have learned the value of teamwork and that more gets achieved with the benefit of using a combination of everyone's different strengths. This was especially apparent with the crews assisting each other when there were problems and the need to support each other throughout the collections as it was tiring and hard work starting at unsociable hours.

My schedule and pattern of work was incredibly varied and it was essential to be flexible as the surveys could only be carried out at the same time as the crews emptied the recycling bins or the data would not be accurate. Some residents typically collect their bin in immediately and others only put their bin out when they hear the recycling wagon arriving. The survey was co-ordinated by me with data being collected by me supported by two apprentices (monitors). I had anticipated the need to start early but had not appreciated the wagons departed by 06:00 hours and that it was necessary to be at the depot well in advance of this each morning to prepare, although we did finish around 13:30 hours. I was enthusiastic throughout (although typically not a morning person) and was pleased to be fully accepted as one of the crew from an early stage.

The real benefit of this placement for me was the establishment of excellent working relationships with the recycling team and the opportunities I was offered in addition to the agreed work placement tasks including taking part in a road show and promoting awareness of recycling to students. I have kept in touch with the team and the crew and they have been interested in the development and results of my project. The placement also made me realise just how much I enjoy the practical side of the recycling work and that sustainable waste management remains an area I find rewarding and one I ideally wish to pursue as a career. I now know that an office based professional career is not my preference but appreciate there will always be a need for some elements of this and I may have to compromise.

The opportunity to work as part of a successful recycling team that had at that time already achieved a 50% recycling rate well ahead of government and EU targets was a fantastic experience for me. My "hands-on" experience enabled me to produce a project with direct relevance to a current environmental issue which would not have been possible with a literature based project. The recycling rate for Bournemouth Borough Council has reached an amazing 63.9% and they were Highly Commended as Local Authority Team of the Year at the National Recycling Awards 2012.



Stephanie Rooke

Research based learning – an employer’s perspective

Student placements provide invaluable benefit for the Council’s waste and recycling team. Students are usually positive, enthusiastic and have a good depth of specialist knowledge especially if a sustainable waste management module or assignment has been chosen. Placements often provide an opportunity for students to complete a project that the recycling team has not previously had the time or resource to undertake. Student placements are also particularly useful over the summer months to assist with busy community events and recycling road shows.

The recycling team does invest a substantial amount of time completing interviews, inductions, training and supervising students whilst on placement, but also completing work logs, evaluations and providing additional data to assist with dissertations and other studies afterwards. This is time well spent if the student delivers, however in a small number of cases students have lacked motivation and approached the placement as a mandatory part of the course rather than an opportunity to gain valuable work experience. To overcome these issues, a structured interview process is undertaken to assess interested students. It is also important that students are monitored and assessed by the employer during their work placement and that this assessment contributes towards their final university grade.

The six-week placements can be somewhat limiting in completing full department training, but instead the opportunity provides a snapshot of activities and services provided by local authority’s waste and recycling teams. Students usually complete a project which involves working with different team members, undertaking practical activities and writing a progress report. The recycling team can allocate a task with previous projects including plastic bag-free town campaign, green waste scheme performance analysis; however we are always open with project suggestions from students, as was the case for this participation survey project.

The project to assess Bournemouth’s kerbside recycling participation rate has been particularly useful in identifying areas in Bournemouth where participation is lower. Roads highlighted have since been visited by the Council’s Waste Awareness Officers to engage with residents on waste and recycling services, with the intention of increasing participation and capture rates.

This project involved a broad spectrum of skills and commitments including data manipulation, collection and analysis, team work, early starts and also an element of staff supervision with other data collectors seeking advice and guidance from the placement student. This type of project would definitely be viewed favourably by Bournemouth council as an employer.

I would recommend student placements to any other organisation. Placements offer an invaluable opportunity for the Council to benefit from student’s innovation, knowledge and drive.



Georgina Lamb