

Learning from International Practice: the Taught Postgraduate Student Experience

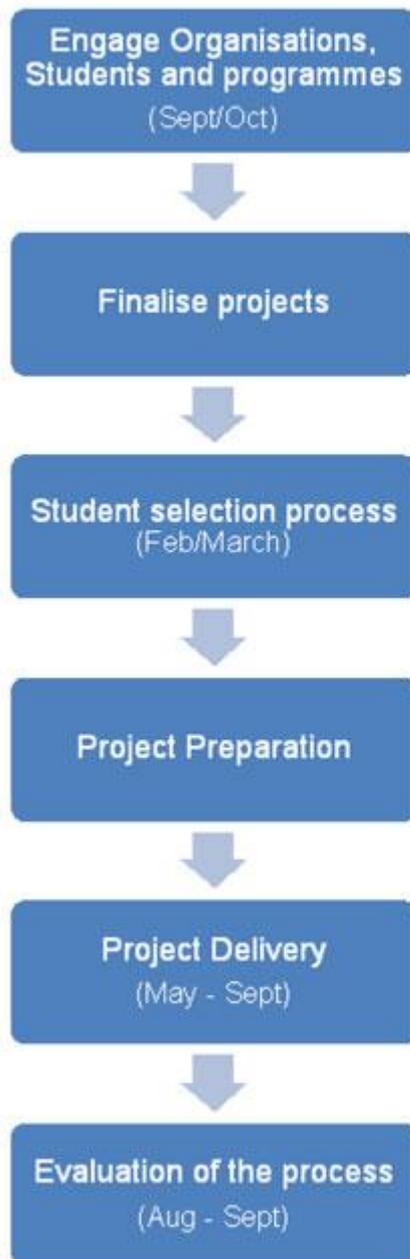
Case study - Making the Most of Masters

Making the Most of Masters aims to improve collaboration between employers and universities; and, enhance student employability and attributes; by providing opportunities for masters students to undertake work based projects (WBPs). Working with taught postgraduate (PGT) programmes, MMM seeks to instil personal responsibility in learning; deepen employer engagement and networks; and facilitate in the exchange of research knowledge.

WBPs are adaptable across disciplines and key economic sectors in Scotland. Funded by the Scottish Funding Council's Learning to Work 2 initiative (LTW2), MMM is a partnership project between the universities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Stirling (see www.masterprojects.ac.uk for more information).

MMM supports PGT programmes at host institutions by providing a framework of support for the successful implementation of WBPs as an alternative to a traditional masters dissertation. This support follows two main strands: operational support and educational support, considering issues from finding organisations willing to offer projects, to supporting students in making the most of the experience. The diagram below summarises the main stages of a WBP and how MMM supports both programme staff and PGT students.

Calendar of a typical Work Based Project (WBP)



Resources available through Making the Most of Masters

- MMM website
 - MMM Information booklet for organisations
 - MMM flyer
 - MMM guide to WBPs for universities
 - case studies of WBPs
 - educational support (engaging students)
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- project proposal form
 - Tool for recording WBP details
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- examples of student selection methods
 - educational support (marketing yourself, relationship building)
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- WBP agreement form and guidelines
 - educational support (preparing for the project and workplace)
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- educational support (making the most of the opportunity, completing the project, project review)
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- feedback surveys for students, organisations and programmes
 - case study templates
 - Tool for recording WBP details

A recent article in the Scottish Enhancement Themes series highlighted that PGT students represent a third of the increase in numbers in the sector over the last decade and a growing consensus that universities need to be doing more for this cohort.

There is also increasing evidence to indicate that work-based experiences can positively influence employability and academic performance (Mansfield, R. 2011). The 2013 High Flyers publication claimed that new graduates without work experience are increasingly unlikely to be offered a good graduate job after university. In order to maximise learning in this area, Pegg et al. (2012) recommend that such experiences are pragmatically embedded into the curriculum and designed using sound pedagogy, which includes space for reflection.

Integrating WBL during a 12 months taught postgraduate programme is particularly difficult due to tight time constraints. Thus, the idea behind MMM was to develop a process - considering this and other WBL issues at masters level – which could become embedded into PGT programmes.

A WBP is very different from a traditional placement or period of work experience (that is often commonplace at undergraduate level), because it must fulfil the assessment criteria for a masters dissertation.

Projects can involve data analysis, modelling, reviews, method optimisation and comparison, equipment development, laboratory or field work - it depends on the business needs, the student's interests and the programme requirements. In addition to the research competency required to produce a dissertation at masters level, students must demonstrate professionalism when producing a piece of work on behalf of an external organisation and take responsibility for ensuring the output meets the needs of all stakeholders.

Tobbell et al. (2010) suggest that effective independent study is one of the principal practices that underpin postgraduate study. A successful WBP student should take ownership to assess the feasibility of the project and plan accordingly; manage the delicate relationship between themselves, their academic supervisor and external supervisor; and ensure their dissertation is finished on time and adheres to the expectations and requirements of both parties. This is evidenced by the fact that many organisations treat the student in a similar manner as they would an external consultant and many academic supervisors can take a more 'light touch' approach than with a traditional dissertation.

Student engagement: Initial results from Making the Most of Masters (2012) have shown that approximately half of projects sourced are not actually taken up by students. Anecdotal evidence suggests that students may view a WBP as a risky option when compared with a more traditional university-based dissertation.

Educational resources developed by MMM aim to introduce the WBP concept early on in the masters year (ideally before arrival) so students can make an informed choice and if appropriate can begin to develop the ownership that is required. However, this can be difficult to implement considering the demand on students transitioning into a masters programme. The best solution appears to be integrating such support with timetabled, face-to-face sessions, supplemented by online resources.

Academic Engagement: Many academics have experience with WBL or placements but few have explicitly explored employability as a concept and have reservations about embedding it in the curriculum. MMM has raised awareness of the need to develop attributes associated with employability and academics have embraced the support available. By working in partnership with Careers and other Support Services, employability has become part of the masters curriculum without putting an additional burden on academic staff.

Ownership: Whilst the benefits of WBPs are accepted, further consideration is needed regarding responsibility for the WBP process. Who has ownership of making employer links and supporting students in the process of securing and undertaking a WBP? Academics? School Administrators? A central support unit or students themselves? Current evidence suggests that there is no 'one size fits all' and MMM is in the process of developing scenario-based case studies to demonstrate different ways of managing WBPs.

MMM is in the process of developing a set of tools and support provision for any PGT programme in Scotland that wishes to offer WBPs as part of a masters programme. Key to

this in relation to masterness are resources that encourage students to take ownership of the process and demonstrate the independent approach to learning expected at masters level.

In the future, we also hope to explore forms of dissertations and look at alternatives, which can maintain academic rigour whilst considering employability. Such forms may include a technical document, a website or a reflective element. Related to this idea is looking at best practice in assessment and curriculum design across different types of masters programme (e.g. a translational masters), identifying elements that are synonymous with masterness.

References

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