

Engaging with industry, creatively

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Introduction

The University of the West of England (UWE) School of Creative Arts' Graduate Placement Scheme began in 2001. It aimed to provide talented media graduates with 12 week paid work placements with Bristol-based media companies. The scheme matches companies interested in sharing professional production knowledge and expertise with new graduates whose creative and/or technical expertise could benefit the host company.

Since 2001, the scheme has placed more than 90 graduates at over 50 Bristol-based design and media companies. Many of the graduates continued working for their host company after the completion of the scheme. In 2008, 70% of graduates continued after 12-week contracts, and 54% continued with full-time employment of 6 months or longer. Despite adverse economic conditions this is the highest level of continued employment since the scheme began.

From 2007, employers have contributed over £25,000, around 33%, of the graduate training allowances. This has enabled the Faculty to offer additional placement places and represents a significant level of employer buy-in and support, especially because creative industries are accustomed to graduates working for free to gain experience.

This study focuses on the development of the scheme since 2006, when a 66% reduction in funding from the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF3) coincided with opening the scheme to a larger applicant pool. Originally Media Practice Graduates were the primary targets, the scheme is now open to graduates from the animation, graphic design, and illustration courses. From 2009, photography, media and cultural studies graduates may also apply. The study shows that by 'managing smart', the graduate placement experience was enhanced to accommodate and support a wider constituency of graduates and employers. Numbers of placements have remained consistent while, driven by high levels of graduate and employer satisfaction, demand has increased. Several placements have led to full-time employment, and employers have responded positively by making increases to their financial contribution to the scheme.

The scheme has served as a faculty case study for graduate employability, preparedness, employer liaison and financial commitment. The scheme fosters greater professional understanding and enhanced innovation for new graduates and Bristol creative Small/Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs). Participating graduates received additional specialised coaching and reviews from senior academic and careers staff. Resources generated and piloted in the scheme are now used as faculty-wide 'best practice'.

The UWE Creative Arts Graduate Placement Scheme has adapted over the years to an increasingly larger constituency of graduates in a fast-paced, rapidly changing creative sector. The project has enabled reappraisal of past practice and provided a valuable perspective on moving university and faculty commitment to employability and professional practise forward.

Context and Rationale

The UWE School of Creative Arts Graduate Placement Scheme (GPS), formerly known as Walking with Directors, began in 2001 as a project to provide talented media graduates with twelve-week, paid work placements with media companies in the region. In 2007, the scheme was offered to approximately 180 graduates from four undergraduate design and media programmes (Animation, Graphic Design, Illustration and Media Practice), with 30 graduates applying for 10 places. Partner companies reflect a balance of disciplines represented in the school. Candidates received specialised creative industries careers coaching from UWE academic and careers staff and are able to make up to three applications. UWE staff recommended a graduate 'short list'; companies can then preview applicant materials via a micro-site and have access to formal applications.

The contribution of creative companies has been instrumental in the scheme's evolution. Participating companies' financial contributions supplemented funding significantly enough for three additional placements to be offered in 2008, and provided seed funding for the 2009 scheme. This represented a vote of confidence from employers when central funding was reduced. In addition to funding, employer focus groups have been fundamental to forming and adapting the scheme, and to shaping the faculty's engagements with creative industries.

Many of the graduates have continued working for the companies after the completion of the scheme, and many of the relationships carry on today. The scheme is enormously beneficial to individual graduates, it impacts on wider learning experiences across undergraduate courses. The scheme benefits creative SMEs, and strengthens UWE's relationship with Bristol's creative sector which is vital to the regional economy.

Learning and Teaching

One challenge currently facing the Graduate Placement Scheme is the limited number of spaces available to serve a growing and increasingly interested pool of graduate applicants.

The scheme is launched annually with an informational meeting at the beginning of May, with an initial application deadline in early June. In 2009, five GPS alumni participated in a panel discussion with interested students emphasising the benefits of the scheme, as well as giving cautionary advice about the importance of gaining work experience as a student.

To give 'real world' competition to the application process, graduates make a formal application via a transparent, open process. They register interest via a Google form, and then make an online submission of their Statement of Interest and a 'professionally-facing' CV for first-round consideration. The online application process creates a record of those who are involved and engaged with the scheme, and provides a valuable resource for a future generation of applicants.

First round applications are posted online and are available for review and constructive comments from applicants. This process is informative and provides a collaborative environment for staff and peer feedback or review. It helps academic staff determine the level and type of further support to be provided in tutorial workshops. Graduates see how different courses market themselves professionally. For example, Media Practice students have seen how Graphic Design students evolve content and information architecture beyond typical chronological presentation. Participating students also consult with UWE Careers Services and use Startdesignmedia.blogspot.com, a resource developed to support students' and graduates' engagement with the creative industries.

To maximise benefit, all applicants receive specialised creative industries counselling with UWE academic and careers staff through tutorial workshops covering application and interview preparation, one-on-one tutorials, and online review. The final application and interview process is vital for both graduates and companies. Many of the companies interviewed over five applicants, giving constructive feedback to all candidates as well as the Graduate Placement Scheme team.

Companies feel strongly that it is their responsibility to support the applicants through the interview process and help them learn from the experience. Many applicants, even when not successful in securing a placement, have made important industry contacts leading to other professional opportunities.

Cultivating Graduate Preparedness

The Graduate Placement Scheme's formalised application process offers direct insight into the graduate preparedness. Over the past two years, the GPS team has noted improvement in the quality of graduate self-promotional materials. Each year, the uptake, preparedness and quality of applicants has improved, culminating in an extremely engaged and competitive applicant pool in 2009.

Representatives from some of Bristol's top creative companies have spoken at the faculty's open industry forums and to second year students as part of their Professional Practice modules. As a result, in 2009, more students are aware of, and are engaging with the diverse creative community through undergraduate work experience modules. They are also more willing to engage via the placement scheme. This year, preliminary applications increased 50% over 2008.

The scheme has helped address identified skills gaps in the sector, place students and graduates and provide a mechanism for direct feedback, between the companies and the university, in a safe, collegial framework. UWE's Employability Strategy, Graduate Development Programme, and increasingly embedded professional practice modules, continue to make inroads and address issues informed by feedback from creative companies participating in the Graduate Placement Scheme. As a result, there are signs of a general shift in attitude among students and new graduates.

Building Key Partnerships

More than 50 creative SMEs have accepted graduates through the Graduate Placement Scheme. The companies were chosen to reflect a balance of disciplines represented in the school, as well as reflect the diverse media and design community. Participating companies include animation co-operatives, traditional design studios, film production companies, post-production houses, commercial events companies, not-for-profit organisations and integrated agencies. Every year since 2007, the company offer has included a balanced 'mix' of returning and new companies to the scheme. The scheme strengthens UWE's partnership with industry, through annual employer focus groups, meetings and regular correspondence and companies feel comfortable sharing their insights, observations and concerns.

Many industry partners are keen to work with graduates from a range of courses, recognising the fresh perspective and insight offered by crossing disciplines. For example, a media practice graduate completed a placement at an animation studio, bringing understanding and expertise in production management. A leading documentary film company employed a graphic design graduate to help rebrand and design their web site, communication materials and motion graphics.

Participating graduates often become actively involved alumni. The 2009 launch of the Graduate Placement Scheme included a panel of five participants from the previous year who were happy to come and share their experiences with current students. Former GPS participants have actively sought to mentor and host student placements, acknowledging the importance of their own placements when starting out in the industry.

To maximise project funding, the Graduate Placement Team proposed 20 placements in 2007-08 (10 per year). They also proposed that employers make a weekly contribution to the graduates' payment. Because of employer financial commitment, the Scheme increased the number of placement to 13 in 2008.

Graduate training allowances are tied directly to current minimum wage and participants received £240 per week in 2008 and 2009. Companies began direct contributions to graduate training allowances in 2007, these have risen from 25% to upwards of 33%

demonstrating commitment to the scheme and UWE's graduates. The faculty absorbed the administrative costs associated with running the scheme allowing for more placement opportunities.

Employer support and contributions demonstrate good faith and buy-in to programs like the Graduate Placement Scheme. This increases the number of funded graduate placements and helps secure other funding streams for future schemes.

Benefits

Each graduate placement is as different as the graduate and the company involved. In 2008, graduates were given a Professional Development Plan package to help them negotiate the terms and outcomes of their placement with their host companies. In the annual steering group, employers commented that the package was useful in adding a mechanism for structured feedback. Employers commented positively that they tended to spend more time mentoring Graduate Placements than a 'typical' junior as mutual expectations were different. Tools and support mechanisms offered by the scheme are seen as extremely useful in the creative sector especially as most smaller creative companies do not have formal training schemes.

At the annual steering group, the length of the placement and compensation are reviewed. The universal consensus is that 12 weeks is the ideal duration of a paid placement. This period allows both graduates and employers to build solid working relationships. In 2008, 13 graduates participated at 11 companies; 9 continued on after their 12-week contract (70%), 7 of these continued with full-time employment of 6 months or longer (54%). Despite adverse economic conditions this is the highest level of continued employment since the scheme began.

The scheme provides a positive educational experience for all parties involved, the university, employers and graduates. While short unpaid placements are common in creative industries, the steering group agreed that the training allowance was instrumental in graduates being able to work for a mutually beneficial 12 week period of time. While many 'traditional' training schemes fund the students, smaller creative SMEs, often fewer than 5 people, would struggle to cover even an additional minimum wage position without support from programmes like the Graduate Placement Scheme.

Despite changes in funding streams for the project, the scheme is so successful for companies and graduates that UWE continued the scheme in 2009. UWE developed new ways to build on the project's 'best practice'. For example, in Spring 2009, the faculty launched an Enterprise Office to support current students and recent graduates by fostering extra-curricular engagement through short projects, placements, live briefs and support entrepreneurial exploration.

The scheme has provided valuable insight and perspective for the ongoing development of student/new graduate employability and understanding of professional practice and industry awareness, tying directly to the university and faculty's employability strategies and Graduate Development Programme. From a faculty perspective, the scheme has provided a forum to test ideas and learning/teaching methods that have been adapted and implemented across a range of academic programmes and year groups.

From its outset in 2001, the UWE Creative Arts Graduate Placement Scheme aimed to achieve six key points:

- Build lasting partnerships between industry and education.
- Provide a unique opportunity for skilled graduates to work within media companies for a period of 3 months.
- Support the growth of creative businesses in the South West.
- Retain more young, talented practitioners in the region.
- Identify skills shortages and training needs.

The scheme has continued to evolve through subsequent phases while remaining true to its fundamental ethos. Cultivating employer relationships and financial support allowed the scheme to fund additional placements in 2007 and 2008. The faculty and employers committed funding placements in 2009. This was to support graduates and the creative community while further investigating sustainability of the scheme in 2010 and beyond. As it reaches maturity, the Graduate Placement Scheme has provided insight into informing the Faculty of Creative Arts strategic agenda on employability and professional practice.