

**2016 ASET Exploration and Enhancement Student Bursary
For Small-Scale Research into Placement or Work-based Learning**

**Developing interest in work placements amongst
prospective and current students**

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1. Project outline, objectives and timescale

Undergraduate work placements are a growth area in the HE sector. Loughborough University has a commitment to facilitate the employability of students by making year-long work placements an optional part of 99% of courses. As an integrated part of the degree programme, work placements are relatively new to the School of Social, Political and Geographical Sciences (SSPGS) at Loughborough. From September 2016, the first cohort of students enrolled on a sandwich course with a work placement firmly embedded in their 4-year course will join our Departments. In Geography, for example, 30 students are currently undertaking work placement with companies such as Adidas, Boots, L'Oreal, GSK and Network Rail and in 2016/7, we are predicting a growth in interest and uptake.

This project will explore students' motivations for embarking on a course where placements are integral, to understand the factors which are significant to their decision-making. It will also look at their expectations of the placement process to help anticipate the support needs of these students. Whilst investigating the factors which influenced the growth in uptake of 4-year courses, the project will also engage with 1st year students to explore the best channels of communication through which placements can be promoted amongst students not currently signed up to work placement. By engaging with those studying for 3 and 4 year courses, it will uncover the motivations for those who choose (not) to undertake a work placement and the factors influential in their decision-making.

In addition, the project will analyse existing data from a short questionnaire conducted by the Careers and Employability Centre which explored the 3 primary reasons for route change amongst students in 2015/6. The results of this short questionnaire will inform the development of the ASET-funded student's research, which will qualitatively and quantitatively delve deeper into students' motivations for undertaking (or withdrawing from) a work placement, informing how we engage and support students to do a placement.

This project will assist the institution, but also members of ASET, in understanding the key factors which influence the decision-making of prospective SSPGS students in relation to placements. In addition, research with existing students will explore the most effective ways of promoting placements, channelling limited resources to the most effective mediums.

Objectives

The project will:

- Investigate motivations for undertaking a placement amongst SSPGS students on 4 year courses;
- Explore the factors which influence other students to take a 3 year route;
- Document the expectations of SSPGS students with regards the placement process;
- Explore methods of promoting work placements to 1st /2nd year SSPGS students not currently enrolled for work placements, to effectively target resources towards students' requirements and increase the uptake of work placements;
- Devise recommendations for stimulating interest in work placements amongst prospective and First Year students.

Timescale

The research project will be conducted throughout July and August. The tasks will be divided over 8 weeks as follows:

Week 1	Familiarise student with policy re: placements in SSPGS. Conduct literature review. Gain data from Academic Registry re: numbers registered for 3/4 year courses in SSPGS. Review results of Careers and Employability Centre questionnaire for those who continued to/ withdrew from placement in 2015/6.
Week 2	Devise questionnaire for September 2016 1 st year cohort; email this out & advertise through social media. The questionnaires will include both qualitative and quantitative elements.
Week 3	Devise questionnaire for September 2016 2 nd year cohort; email this out & advertise through social media. The questionnaires will include both qualitative and quantitative elements.
Week 4	Skype interviews / focus groups (depending on participants' availability and geographical location) with selected questionnaire respondents (c. 5-10).

Week 5	Analyse questionnaire data.
Week 6	Write report.
Week 7	Present findings to staff across SSPGS & institution.
Week 8	Finalise report. Dissemination of findings at ASET 2016.

2. Supervisor's role

The student will be supervised by Dr Helena Pimlott-Wilson, Placements Director for the Department of Geography. Helena is also a Lecturer in the Department and has previously supervised postdoctoral researchers.

Helena has research interests in education and graduate educational mobility. She will directly supervise the student and guide them in the completion of their duties. Helena will set targets and milestones through consultation with the student and regularly check on progress towards these targets.

Dr Pimlott-Wilson has a MA in Research Methodology (Distinction) and PhD (2008) from the University of Liverpool. She has received funding from the ESRC and was awarded a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship. She has over 15 publications, is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and has presented at numerous international conferences.

3. Students' role

Contribution to the project

To ensure the success of the project, the student will:

- Liaise with Academic Registry to gain information about the cohort of students to join the University in September, including details of those aiming to undertake a placement year;
- Review the results of the Careers and Employability short survey of students who undertook/ withdrew from a placement in 2015/6;
- Design a questionnaire to elicit information about prospective students' motivations for selecting a sandwich course;
- Design a questionnaire to elicit information from students who have recently completed their 1st year of studies to explore appropriate methods of communication and promotion to increase the visibility and take up of placements amongst SSPGS students;
- Compile questionnaire responses and analyse these using SPSS;
- Assist with report and presentation preparation.

Development of the student

The student will develop the following skills throughout the project:

- Questionnaire design;
- Data analysis, including training in the use of statistical packages (SPSS);
- Knowledge of MS Office packages (Word & Excel);
- Written & oral communication skills;
- An understanding of work placements and the broader HEI context.

The student will also develop soft skills in team working, organisation and time & project management.

The student will be encouraged to reflect on the skills acquired at regular intervals through reflective STAR (Situation, Task, Action, Result) diaries. The student will have frequent one-to-one contact with Helena, will receive support when required but also take responsibility for tasks. The student will be based in our Postgraduate Research Student office and thus have a community of peer support and access to a network of postgraduates. The student will spend some time working alongside the Placements Officer with responsibility for SSPGS to understand current ways of working. The Student will also have interactions with other academic departments including Academic Registry and the Careers and Employability Centre.

Current students will be permitted to use the data collected for their final year dissertation, should they wish to do so.

Recruitment

The student (or recent Loughborough SSPGS graduate) will be recruited internally through:

- Careers Online (internal portal for current students & Loughborough graduates);
- Email lists;
- Second and final year lecture slots.

The project will follow a recruitment process similar to that when applying for a graduate position (application, interviews, presentation etc.) as part of the overall learning process.

4. Importance for other HEIs

This project will be crucial to other HEIs. It will reveal the factors which influence prospective students in the social, political and geographical sciences in their decision to undertake a sandwich course, identifying the role of Open Days, brochures, staff and existing students alongside those beyond the University's sphere of activity. Understanding the expectations of prospective students in relation to placements, and the channels of communication favoured by existing SSPGS students in order to promote placements is valuable to many HEIs in the context of budget constraints.

5. Support from senior management

This project has the support of the Associate Dean for Research in SSPGS (Prof. Liz Stokoe) and the Head of Department in Geography (Prof. Helen Rendell).