



**Careers
+ Placements**

2017 ASET Research Bursary - Final Report

“Increasing student engagement and peer-to-peer support through the Careers +Placements Associates Pilot”

Student: Maariyah Imran, BSc Sociology (2nd Year)

Supervisor: Carolina Salinas, Head of Placements

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The aim of this report is to investigate the benefits and outcomes of Aston's Careers+Placements (C+P) Student Associates Pilot delivered during 2016/17. It looks at all aspects of the pilot from the recruitment and training of Associates, to the delivery of how they supported the services, outcomes achieved, areas for improvement and recommendations for the future, aiming at establishing this initiative in the department for the long term.
- The C+P Student Associates Pilot aimed to provide a student voice throughout the work of the C+P Department and, as a result, to increase the number of students who engage with our services, with a particular focus on increasing placements uptake.
- The C+P Student Associates focus is to support the design, development and delivery of Aston's C+P key student facing services, ensuring that what the department offers, meet the needs of Aston students.
- As student numbers grow and the student demographic changes in Aston, it becomes increasingly more difficult to engage students in the services offered in the C+P Department. Within this context, now more than ever, peer to peer support and the student voice have become critical when designing employability services. They are essential components to increase student engagement. Particularly students from differential groups, who have longer distance to travel in their employability and placement journey, for whom C+P interactions and interventions have a bigger effect.
- The potential impact of this pilot is around increasing engagement across the board, but with a focus to reach those students who need it most, those from differential groups, including Widening Participation, BAME, mature students and other less represented groups in the placements and employability context. Higher engagement in a focused, structured and monitored way (with a specific menu of options and activities throughout years 1, 2 and final year) has the potential to increase summer internships, placement and mentoring uptake, ultimately resulting on improving the employability of our students and their work-readiness.
- A common observation is that students demand and expect contact with other students to complement interactions with a Careers and Placement Coordinators as part of their placement search and preparation. Associates acknowledged that the learning benefits of those interactions work both ways, benefitting the Associate as much as the student who is receiving the advice. More needs to be done however, to better understand how these interactions add value to specific differential and under-represented groups.
- In this investigation, a cohort of second year undergraduates were surveyed after completing the second year placement search period, and prior to the start of their placement year. 88 students responded the survey and 54% of those had utilised the Associates services. Respondents felt 'very satisfied' with the service rating it within the '7 to 10' scale.
- Focus group discussions took place with Student Associates themselves about the type of services they delivered, their experience of being an Associate, the training, induction, learnings and benefits from the experience. Data from the focus group showed broad agreement among participants in that the Associates Pilot was beneficial for both second

year students looking for placements but also the Associates themselves as a developmental and reflective activity. The discussion also highlighted that in order to maximise engagement with Associates, a clearer marketing campaign and promotion of the service needed to take place, as well as more structured services available and a Mentor for Associates to monitor progress and development.

- Further recommendations for the next phase 2 of the pilot are made within the report.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction.....	5
2. Who are Careers+Placements Student Associates.....	6
3. Existing Evidence and Literature Review.....	8
4. Objectives.....	9
5. Methodology.....	9
5.1. Questionnaire to Second Years	9
5.2. Follow up Telephone Calls.....	9
5.3. Focus Group with Associates.....	9
6. RESULTS: QUESTIONNAIRE.....	10
6.1 What placement services did you use during your placement search?	10
6.2 Would you recommend the services to your peers?.....	10
7. RESULTS: FOLLOW UP TELEPHONE CALLS.....	11
8. RESULTS: FOCUS GROUP	12
8.1. As an Associate what services and activities were you involved in?.....	13
8.2. From this experience, what went well?.....	13
8.3. What did not work well?.....	13
8.4. What was the communication like between the Student Associates and C+P Staff? Any recommendations for improvement?.....	14
8.5. What was particularly useful for you as a Student Associate?.....	14
8.6. What did you enjoy as a Student Associate?.....	14
8.7. How do you feel about the recruitment process? Could it have been done differently?.....	15
8.8. How was the induction and the training process?.....	16
8.9. How do you feel about the service overall?.....	16
8.10. How has being an Associate helped you on your own development?.....	16
8.11. What impact do think you have made to the students you have supported?.....	17
8.12. How can we improve this programme and do you have any recommendations?.....	17
8.13. Would you have liked to use social media as a tool to promote C+P services to students? Would having a “champion” per School work well in future?.....	17
9. Recommendations	18
10. Conclusion	18
11. References	21
12. Appendices	22
10.1. Placement Questionnaire	22
10.2. Focus Group	24

1. Introduction

The importance of ‘employable graduates’ is now widely acknowledged within Higher Education and at Aston employability continues to be at the centre of what we do. With over 50 years of experience in providing students with integrated year-long employer placement opportunities, Aston pioneered this approach to university education. In 2017/18 nearly 1,900 (c.72%) of Aston undergraduates have opted for a placement or pre-registration year, as part of a four year course. By 2020 our goal is to have 100 per cent of our students taking a placement and 35% of those overseas. As well as developing the professional skills and knowledge, the placement year strengthens transferable skills such as team working, communications and problem solving, particularly benefiting differential student groups and positively impacting graduate outcomes. The placement experience helps students to become adaptable, confident and self-aware and builds their social capital and networks.

Aston is also leading in student outward mobility with 400 students on placement abroad (including both work and study placements). This helps deliver Aston’s objective to produce the most employable global graduates. Overseas placements include English-speaking and foreign language placements, so students who do not speak a second language can still take advantage of exciting worldwide placement opportunities.

A placement year spent with an employer has proven to enhance graduate employment prospects and degree performance. Research, including studies undertaken at Aston University (Moores and Reddy, 2011, Driffield, Foster and Higson, 2011, James and Higson, 2016), demonstrates that the placement year has a direct impact on degree attainment and improve academic performance, making a significant difference to employment prospects and a positive contribution to social mobility and ability to work in a global context.

Investment in the placement year continues, with Aston University being 3rd in the UK ranking for integrated placements (HESA, 2017) and one of the top 20 universities for graduate employability (DLHE, 2016). However, as student numbers grow and the student demographic becomes more challenging in Aston, it becomes increasingly more difficult to engage students in the services offered in the C+P Department, including placement engagement. Within this context, now more than ever, peer to peer support and the student voice have become critical when designing employability services. They are essential components to increase student engagement. Particularly students from differential groups, who have longer distance to travel in their employability and placement journey, for whom C+P interactions and interventions have a bigger effect once they engage with the service.

For this to happen it was evident that there was a need to engage with students as active partners and not just passive recipients of the services offered by the C+P teams. This is where the Student Associates Pilot came into place, to maximise collaboration with engaged students as key ‘allies’ in engaging the disengaged. To increase student engagement with C+P services it was important to incorporate the student’s voice and perspective in the services we design and offer, this was the main thinking behind the pilot. This report highlights the key findings and recommendations as part of the pilot.

The aim of the investigation was to establish whether the C+P Student Associates Pilot, launched in the autumn of 2016, was successful and worth of a second phase. This pilot was launched to test whether student peer to peer interaction with placement returners was beneficial for those looking for placement during the second year, as well as the Associates themselves as final year students. It was apparent that some second year students were demotivated following application rejections and needed that 'extra push' and extra tips from Associates to continue with the placement search. Simply hearing the advice from a Placement Coordinator did not seem to be working anymore for some student groups who had started to disengage, and it was important to change this if we were to maintain and increase second year engagement and placements uptake.

This report establishes the outcome of the pilot and its effectiveness through the personal experience of second year students and the Associates who participated in it. Existing literature related to the value of student peer to peer interaction is reviewed and the methodology detailed, including the different techniques and approaches used to undertake the research. The report also highlights the key findings gathered from the qualitative and quantitative methods. Finally, the recommendations from the research are listed, some of which have started to be implemented in the second phase of the pilot. The main focus of the research was on the qualitative aspects gathered from the student experience, and in-depth information gathered to understand what really worked from the pilot and what aspects need to be changed in the second phase.

2. Who are C+P Student Associates?

C+P Associates are students, primarily final year placement returners, who support the C+P Team by delivering a variety of services to other students in the form of peer to peer support, sharing their personal experience within the context of the placement search and employability. There are two main motives for introducing this pilot and these are to increase engagement among disengaged student groups and to add the 'student voice' in the C+P Department. The Associates can sign up to deliver various services available throughout the year and support its delivery to second year students. These services include mock interviews, 1-2-1 meetings, open day talks, CV feedback sessions and many more. This pilot can be seen to have played a vital role in engaging 'hard to reach' student groups who otherwise would have not engaged with the C+P services, benefiting students in obtaining that help in a subtle way, via the Associates, and filling a void in the system.

There was a formal launch of the pilot in the autumn of 2016, followed by a marketing campaign to attract potential candidates among placement returners. A formal recruitment and selection process took place and twenty Associates were recruited for the pilot across all Schools, representing a variety of disciplines and types of placements. It was important to provide structured training for the Associates as well as structured induction days, so they could undertake the role effectively. The Associate role was introduced as a paid role, recognising the value they add to the C+P services. Associates are mainly final year placement returners and are different from Placement Students recruited to do their placement within the C+P Department.

The Associates' responsibilities include:

- Working with Placement Coordinators and Careers Consultants, act as a champion for C+P. Encouraging students to start planning for their placement search and graduate careers from first year through use of social media
- Working with Placement Coordinators and Careers Consultants, provide a 'drop-in' service to offer initial advice to students on how to get the most of using C+P Services, signpost to relevant support and offer applications/CV advice
- Working with the C+P Student Engagement Team and Students' Union, ensure fellow students know about C+P events and support - what is on offer, what events are happening and about any other opportunities, such as having a mentor through the use of lecture 'shout-outs' and social media
- Working with the Learner Enhancement Team, act as mentors and mentees
- Support the recruitment of C+P Staff as student panels
- Attending Student and Staff Consultative Committees in your school of study to keep everyone up-to-date with C+P activities; but also help us to collate and act on feedback
- Contribute to and lead research projects to help develop innovative and up-to-date services within C+P
- Assisting where possible at 'on and off' campus events, such as the C+P Fairs, School presentations, employer workshops and any specific events within your own School of Study
- Attending any training, meetings and events required for the role

Skills and experience required to be an Associate include:

- Previous experience is not required, but interest to be a C+P Ambassador
- Excellent verbal and written communication skills
- Ability to influence others and to communicate effectively - not just with your fellow students but also with all C+P stakeholders
- Excellent attention to detail
- Determination and drive to succeed and overcome any barriers
- Good organisational and time management skills
- Ability and commitment to attend all relevant events and occasions required for the role.

Peer to peer interaction took a variety of forms throughout the pilot, introducing services to further develop in the second phase:

- Various placement events
- Supporting with student focused events including jobs fair, student meet and greet, mature students event, placements motivation event, careers fairs, lecture shout outs
- Supporting with pre-entry activities including delivery of applicant visit day presentations
- Establishing the Associate's peer to peer e-advice via social media and VLE
- Support the various 'Calling Campaigns' to target specific student groups i.e. second years who have been disengaged in the placement search

A good example of the peer to peer Associate role 'in action' can be seen through the Associates' contribution at the International Placements Event. This is a key event in the placements preparation calendar for second year students, which takes place every November. This unique event offers an attractive platform for Associates to showcase their placement experience abroad and share it with second year students in a friendly student space. It promotes and encourages discussion between second year students and final year Associates who have recently returned from placement overseas. C+P team facilitate the interaction by organising the event, providing the venue and engaging Associates to man various stands. Student feedback (obtained via our annual evaluation questionnaire) demonstrates the value of this event.

Some of the benefits of interacting with Associated mentioned by second year students include:

- Practical tips
- Advice every step of the way
- Help with considering the type of placement to take i.e. work vs study abroad
- Making new friends
- Feedback from students that have recently undergone specific recruitment processes
- Informal and fast, avoiding the formal appointment booking system to see a Placement Coordinator for an appointment

Final year student Associates also quote benefits for themselves, as they are able to develop coaching and mentoring skills, and practice articulating and sharing some of their placement learning, practicing for future graduate recruitment processes which most of them undergo during final year. They also enjoy sharing their knowledge and experiences and 'giving back' supporting other students.

3. Existing Evidence and Literature Review

In order to understand the importance of student peer to peer collaboration it is important to look at studies and evidence that is already available. Ocker & Yaverbaum (1999) compared the effectiveness of two methods of peer to peer collaboration; computer mediated and face to face collaboration on a small group of MBA students in the USA. They agreed with previous research (Whipple, 1987; Alavi, 1994) in that student collaboration is essentially a social interaction rather than knowledge being transferred from expert to learned, it is rather created in the learning community which can be seen to be more effective. They also highlight previous research in which student collaboration has been argued to provide an opportunity for clarification and feedback from peers, as well as exposure to alternative views (Glasser & Bassok, 1989 in Ocker & Yaverbaum, 1999). They concluded that face-to-face collaboration is superior in terms of students' satisfaction with the learning experience and the quality of the discussions, which was reinforced in a later research by Ertmer et al (2007).

More specific to placements and work based learning contexts, ASET's 'A Good Guide for Placement and Other Work-Based Learning Opportunities in Higher Education' (2009) clearly establishes student peer-to-peer collaboration as an element of best practice to be included as part of the preparatory and support role played by the Higher Education Institution (HEI). ASET encourages HEI's to make arrangements for students to share their experiences with each other as well as making provision for reflection, consolidation and dissemination of the students' learning experiences, both individual and collective (p.7).

These all show the importance of peer to peer in a variety of educational settings as sharing similar experience and speaking to other students that are one step ahead gives assurance and prepares students for what is to come. It is a way to help students help each other.

In addition to this body of literature, there is research which specifically focuses on the influence of peer and social networks in first job searches by Marmaros and Sacerdote (2002). They found that students perceived networking with peers, alumni, faculty and relatives to be an important part of finding their first job. They found that the 'job search process involves collecting and receiving information and assistance from a variety of social networks including peer networks' (p. 879).

There are, however, challenges facing student collaboration which are highlighted in the research. These include, overcoming students' anxiety about the interaction in its various forms, especially when students have little or no experience of collaboration (Fellenz, 2006). According to Palloff and Pratt (1999, in Ertmer et al, 2007) not everybody has the ability to give meaningful feedback, or to share experiences and interact. Similarly, ensuring the reliability and validity of the information exchanged could be an issue, especially as it has been argued that students have a tendency to either inflate or deflate scores (or experiences) when providing feedback to their peers (Topping 1998; Fellenz 2006). To set up and implement systems and procedures to promote and support student collaboration could have resource implications (Fellenz, 2006; Demirbag Kaplan et al, 2010). Another key challenge identified in the literature is student engagement and motivation, with the research suggesting that it can be difficult to motivate students' participation if the collaboration is not assessed or penalised (Black, 2005). In the same vein, educators, it has been argued, have the challenge to better educate students about the benefits of various forms of student collaboration (Ocker & Yaverbaum, 1999).

4. Objectives

The research project will:

- Establish the effectiveness of the Student Associate pilot
- Establish the benefits of the pilot to second year students and the Associates
- Establish any improvements needed to make the scheme more effective in phase 2

5. Methodology

The approach undertaken to carry out the investigation was a 'mixed method approach', which is a term used to describe research that integrated quantitative and qualitative methods within a single project (Bryman, 2012). Using a 'mixed method approach' allows for clarification of findings to ensure that the results gained are accurate. There are benefits of using a mixed method approach as the qualitative research allows gaining a contextual understanding and the quantitative research enables you to explore specific issues that you are interested in (Bryman, 2012). It allows the researcher to use the qualitative findings to illustrate quantitative results; therefore, there is the ability to cross-reference the findings to ensure accurate data is gained and it can clarify any anomalies that may be present. Using more than one method means that any error that may occur in one process will compensate with the strengths of the other method (Mitchell, 1986).

The research methods utilised include:

- Second Year questionnaire
- Follow up telephone calls
- Focus group with Associates

6. Questionnaire to Second Years

A Survey Monkey questionnaire was sent out to a cohort of second-year students searching for placements across all schools (see Appendix 1). It had a variety of questions related to the C+P team services available, however only three questions were of interest to this research. These questions were:

- **Q3. Have you accessed the Placements Support services?**
 - Yes
 - No
- **Q4. If yes, which services have you used? (Select all that apply)**
 - One to one appointment
 - Sessions
 - Drop-ins
 - CV feedback
 - Mock interviews
 - Placement Fairs
 - Workshops
 - Peer-to-peer student advice, Placement Student Associates
 - Other (specify)
- **Q14. Would you recommend Careers and Placement Service to your peers and if yes, please select all that apply?**
 - One to one appointment
 - Sessions
 - Drop-ins
 - CV feedback
 - Mock interviews
 - Placement Fairs
 - Workshops

- Peer-to-peer student advice, Placement Student Associates
- Other (specify)
- I would not recommend the Careers and Placements Survey

These are the questions which were of interest, as they included the peer to peer element which is investigated in this report, '**what placement services have you used? Including peer to peer**' and '**would you recommend them to your peers?**' Even though response rate was low with 88 students responding the questionnaire, 54% of the students who responded had some form of peer to peer interaction with student Associates and had engaged with the pilot. From those students who had interacted with Associates, all selected the 'very satisfied' option and rated the experience in a score between '7-10' which confirmed that the engagement with Associates had been positive and beneficial. All students who engaged with Associates as part of the placement search had successfully found a placement by August 2017 when this research was conducted.

This questionnaire was only an initial attempt to understand the surface levels of engagement between second years and Associates, but more needs to be asked and analysed in phase 2 of the pilot. A deeper understanding of the level of engagement with Associates is necessary, as well as second years' actual benefits from that interaction. It would also be important to track second years' placement outcomes and establish any possible correlation between interaction with Associates and an earlier and/or successful placement outcome.

7. Follow up Telephone Calls

A sample of 30 second year students (64%) who responded the questionnaire were also contacted over the telephone to get a more detailed understanding of their experience of having interacted with Associates. The aim of the follow up phone calls was to better understand the students' experience and impact of that interaction with Associates as part of the pilot. The follow up telephone calls focused around the interaction with Associates but went deeper than the questionnaire. The questions asked included:

Q1. Did you know about the Associates pilot before your interaction?

Only half of the students had heard about the pilot prior to the interaction with an Associate. This made it clear that more needs to be done to market the service to second year students in phase 2.

Q2. Would you recommend these services to peers?

All students without exception would recommend the service of engaging with an Associate as part of their placement search, application and preparation

Q3. Did the interaction with Associates help in your placement search and outcomes?

All students without exception felt the interaction with an Associate helped as part of their placement search, application, preparation and outcomes. All students confirmed having found a placement by the time this research was conducted

Q4. Was there anything we can improve on?

Most students felt the pilot and Associate services should have been advertised and promoted more widely. Associates should be easily identifiable and visible throughout campus to be approached.

Students' comments included the following:

'I really enjoyed the CV Feedback service delivered by the Associate and the peer to peer approach was friendlier, less formal, which I preferred. However I thought the email general enquiries service was slow'

'I think that the student Associates pilot is a very good idea, and would definitely recommend to my peers, I felt I could relate to them easier than to a Coordinator, I felt they had already gone through the same experience I am going through'

'I wasn't aware of the Associates pilot before I used the service, but it seems like an excellent idea, all the services provided to me were at a very high standard.'

'I wasn't aware of the Associates nor were they mentioned in the Placement Sessions, but I really enjoyed the mock interviews with an Associate as they gave me confidence and friendly tips the Coordinators may have not included in the same way'

'I felt I could confide in the Student Associate, they seemed more like a friend than staff'

'I was aware of the Student Associates, and thought it was a very good idea and found them very useful for my own placement search; I would also consider becoming one during Final Year''

These were only some of the key aspects highlighted by the second year students who engaged in the follow up calls. It was evident that many students were unaware of the pilot and the service offered by Associates. This most probably prevented a considerable number of students from engaging with the service as part of the pilot. However, once the students engaged with Associates, even if unaware of the service, seemed very intrigued and positive about the interaction and made full use of the support available.

8. Focus Group with Associates

A focus group was conducted with eight of the Student Associates and three experienced staff from the C+P team facilitated the activity (see Appendix 2). This exercise was effective to understand the individual experiences of each of the Associates as part of the pilot. As Patton (1990) states, the interviewing process allows the interviewer to find out what is on someone's mind. The focus groups were recorded and transcribed; this was done to ensure that no information was missed. In addition, while conducting the focus group notes were taken by the facilitators.

The focus group began at 10:30am and lunch was served at 12:00pm, it was expected to overrun slightly and measures were in place to ensure this eventuality was accommodated.

Participants were enthusiastic and willing to share lots of information on their experience so extra time was allocated. At around 1.00pm a couple of the Associates volunteered to record a video, where they shared their experience of being an Associate and promoted the role to future placement returners. The videos are used to advertise the benefits of being an Associate and will be used as part of the marketing campaign for the phase 2 of the pilot. All participants signed an ethics form just to consent to their voice being recorded and some consented to videos being recorded. As well as any quotes being used, but their privacy was of utmost importance.

Findings

8.1 As an Associate what services and activities were you involved in?

Student Associates were firstly asked about the types of services and activities they were involved in, they mentioned a variety of tasks such as: blogging, mock interviews, CV feedback, 1-2-1 meetings, quick queries, presenting, telephone research, open days and placement talks. It soon became clear that the level of involvement from the Associates had been high and covered a wide variety of services to reach and support second year students across a broad spectrum.

One Associate mentioned:

'I was able to document and blog the reality of being a clinical psychologist during my placement, this not only gave other students an idea of what it was like but allowed me to reflect on my own experience'

8.2. From this experience, what went well?

Associates highlighted that being able to share their placement experience was extremely positive. Being able to re-live some parts of the experience helped them to reflect of their learnings but also to bust some myths second year students have about some types of placements.

It is an opportunity to highlight to students how much preparation they need to do be successful in finding a placement. In addition, it was great for Associates to realise how much they have learnt and matured compared to before the placement.

Other comments from Associates included feeling empowered to make a positive impact on second year students, by reassuring them that is OK to do things differently, or that is still possible to find a placement late in the summer, or that failing and being rejected by employers was a normal part of the process.

8.3. What did not work well?

Associates mentioned the challenges of when there are no suitable placement opportunities available for specific degrees. Despite students being engaged in the placement process, if

there are no suitable roles advertised in the university jobs portal, it really affects negatively student engagement from that point onwards. This is the case with some engineering degrees like Chemical Engineering and Product Design, or some Health Sciences degrees like Biomedical Sciences... They also found hard to persuade students to consider placements outside their subject area as still beneficial learning experiences. This prompted discussion about incorporating training related to speculative applications and coaching students through the independent placement search outside the university portal. This is part of a wider conversation about providing students the tools necessary to be more independent in their placement search, and awareness for C+P staff on the messages that Associates may provide to students around this theme.

'some students lacked motivation due to so many rejections but needed that extra push of try one last time'

Other comments about areas that do not work well related to low student motivation and resilience and how best they can help students who want to give up... This raised the question of tailored training for Associates as part of phase 2.

8.4. What was communication like between the Student Associates and C+P Staff? Any recommendations for improvement?

Associates felt they needed a C+P Mentor as the key contact point for them in the team. They felt they needed a space, forum or monthly meeting for Associates to get together and exchange experiences and tips. This will be incorporated in phase 2.

8.5. What was particularly useful for you as a Student Associate?

Participants found that the training and resources provided were beneficial as:

'I felt like a pro in such a short period of time, and I knew that if I needed help I could ask any staff member.'

Being an Associate gave them an insight into the C+P team and allowed them to share this knowledge with other students. It provided them with communication skills and gave them the ability to build networks with the team, which as a result helped them search for graduate roles. They were able to really understand students and how unprepared they may be and could share their own experience and reassure them. A very important point that one of the participants mentioned was that being an associate:

'Acted as a bridge between the careers and placements team and the students, as students were able to relate to us as students more making it easier for them to share personal information.'

Another surprising aspect was that small details really helped them to integrate in the C+P team faster, and made a big difference, as the associates mentioned:

'I really liked the pictures chart on the board with the names of all the staff members in the team as it helped me to familiarise myself with the team and allowed me to integrate easier.'

8.6. What did you enjoy as a Student Associate?

When asked the question what did you enjoy as an Associate many participants used the term 'rewarding' when describing their experience, showing that it is not just another job but a role that 'makes a change' and in the end both the student and Associate benefit in some way. Making a difference to other students and giving back were key aspects mentioned.

'The fact that I felt like I made a difference was very rewarding in itself.'

Another aspect that was enjoyed was having 1-2-1 sessions with students, and being able to get to know them and pass on personal experiences which can benefit them. They enjoyed providing opportunities for students and students would be so grateful saying *'I wouldn't have applied if it wasn't for you'*, just the gratitude was worth it for the Associates. They also found students could be vulnerable with them and share personal details as they found they could relate to their own circumstances which not only gave them reassurance but someone to talk to.

Flexibility was also mentioned as one of the key factors. Not having that permanent commitment during final year but in the periods when it was suitable.

8.7. & 8.8. How do you feel about the recruitment / induction processes? Could it have been done better or differently?

They were then asked about the recruitment process, induction and training. The recruitment process was said to be comfortable, short and was generally seen as a positive experience as it gave them a:

'taster for grad scheme training but was friendlier'

The experience was said to be *'very informative'* and the activities were very engaging but different to anything they had taken part in before. One aspect that was highly praised by all the Associates was that:

'The staff was very friendly, and the training was not padded over one week or two but was given to us as we went along. This meant that once we were comfortable with one role we would then move onto the next, so we weren't rushed, and it was really helpful and fully set me for the role'

However as expected there were some negative aspects, and these were that some Associates had system login issues at the start, one thing that they really didn't like was that:

'The training sessions were too long and clashed with other training programmes so having them over a few days would be flexible'

Another aspect that was criticised was that it was *'repetitive'* information that had been heard before and they felt there were too many career talks. One suggestion that was given was having a training pack with lots of handy tips and tricks that they could refer to whenever needed.



Photos from the Recruitment & Training Day

8.9. How do you feel about the service overall?

Associates felt they act as a 'bridge' between students and C+P, particularly for students who are disengaged.

8.10. How has being an associate helped you on your own development?

From a personal development perspective, participants found that the student Associates pilot provided them with many skills these included;

'communication, organisation and presenting skills which I can use in my own practical life as they are all transferable skills'

The Associates were also asked to comment on the communication with the Staff members, they felt like they were treating like staff instead of students and enjoyed the positive welcoming environment.

'We felt as though we were part of the family and the team was very welcoming'

8.11. What impact do think you have made to the students you have supported?

Associates felt they have made students they have interacted with feel that they care. Also bringing students closer to the Department.

Talking to students about their personal experience of 'before placement' and 'after placement' was very impactful to some students.

Enhancing students' confidence.



For some questions we asked the students to write down the answers, just to make the session a bit more interactive. They wrote down the impact they thought they made to students they helped and here are some of the things they mentioned:

- Gave students an open honest approach to placement
- Provided motivation
- Gave them a better understanding of the C+P services
- Helped them secure a placement
- Helped students broaden their horizon
- Gave them that 'can do it' mentality which then could be used in the future for grad jobs.

8.12. How can we improve this programme and do you have any recommendations?

Comments and suggestions included:

Engage with more students, promote Associates more widely, collaborate with Course Reps, with the Student Union, and designate a Mentor for Associates, an ongoing CV corner shop run by Associates...

8.13. Would you have liked to use social media as a tool to promote C+P services to students? Would having a "champion" per School work well in future?

Yes! Must use in order of preference: Snapchat, Instagram stories, Twitter and Facebook (which is in decline now among students...)

Videos

A few Videos were also recorded with two of the student Associates Ali, see link below:
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLPmtaW5JG8TO4O_u4ZQ-rB765ro_pqGlr

9. Recommendations

From the experience of the pilot and research project, there have been a number of recommendations given to apply to phase 2 of the pilot and longer term. The recommendations aim to make the project efficient, more robust and impactful for the following years. The suggestions included:

- Better advertisement - more promotion was needed when marketing the pilot and recruiting the Associates to ensure that more students were aware of the role and could apply.
- Visibility - Associates felt that they were not easily visible so having some sort of jumper or lanyard would make other students aware of who an Associate is and can be easily approached.
- Recruitment of Associates throughout the year - having student Associates throughout the whole year rather than a few months during peak of activity an student demand, would be more helpful for students and C+P would be able to build stronger relationship with them.
- Recruitment of Associates from different subject areas - this is so students can relate to a diverse Associate group.
- Training pack - so the Associates have something to refer back to and can use for any tips as part of their role.
- Meetings between Associates - this was to ensure they were able to share experiences and support each other as part of the role.
- Student Associate Supervisor/Mentor - having a supervisor will allow the Associates to have a main point of contact and be able to meet regularly or consult when they have issues or difficulties.
- Engaging with students via social events - Associates taking part in Student Societies and events to make themselves more visible and make students aware of their role.
- CV corner shop - a space designated for the student Associate to be available once/twice a week where students can just pop in without an appointment to check their CV.
- Social media champions - having champions from each school to share their experience while on placement and post via Snapchat.
- Clearer success measures – this needs to be more defined for phase 2. For example 1) a more elaborated in depth second year survey that asks more questions about Associates and 2) what placement search pattern / how early are students placed from those who interact with Associates?
- Refer a friend / introduce a friend to Associates scheme – a referral process could be created so that more students are aware of the Student Associate scheme and benefited from an introduction.

Some of these recommendations have already been set in place as part of the phase 2 which is being implemented during the academic year 2017/18.

10. Conclusion

This research project funded by ASET can be seen to have been a success on the basis of the feedback received, experiences shared and outcomes achieved by the second years and Associates involved. It gave C+P at Aston the unique opportunity to look into the pilot's phase 1 outcomes, including the positive experience of second years searching for and finding a placement, the type and depth of interaction with Associates, and also the positive experience of Associates themselves. It has given Aston the chance to look at gaps and recommendations for phase 2 to strengthen impact and outcomes in future as part of increasing placements uptake. As well as the way these are researched and their correlation looked into in phase 2.

Both this research and our own experience of the pilot show the benefits of student peer to peer collaboration and collaborative learning on both sides. These include moving towards a student-centered approach (Demirbag Kaplan et al, 2010) where students are active partners; enhancing student interconnectivity and interactivity (Peterson et al, 1997; Peltier et al, 2003; in Demirbag Kaplan et al, 2010), particularly with the more disengaged groups; and increasing students' learning and their level of satisfaction with the learning processes and outcomes (Johnson and Johnson, 1989 in Ocker and Yaverbaum, 1999).

In Aston, students demand the interaction and experience-sharing support mechanisms to be available to them when searching for a placement. In the same vein, Associates tell us that they want to share and support their peers and they benefit from that experience through enhancing their own learning. The promise, however, of student collaboration as a fully integrated element of the placement search process can only be fully realised if obstacles such as final year student engagement, structured training and time/resource implications are successfully tackled. In all, we believe that undergraduate peer to peer interaction as part of the search and preparation for placements can improve the quality of the students' experience and increase their engagement in the learning task.

This report has demonstrated that the C+P Student Associates Pilot has started to provide a firmer student voice to the work of the C+P and, as a result, hinted towards an increase in the number of students who engaged with our services and did a placement as a result. However, work is still ongoing and more research needs to take place to establish the degree in which this work is supporting an increase on placements uptake. Placements uptake has increased 3% (by c350 extra students undertaking a placement during 2017/18) during the year the pilot was implemented. More extensive research however, needs to take place to establish the level of correlation between these factors and analyse the student groups these specific interventions have affected.

As student numbers grow and the student demographic becomes more challenging in Aston, peer to peer support and the student voice have become critical when designing

employability services. They are essential components to increase student engagement from students from differential groups, who have longer distance to travel in their employability journey, for whom C+P interactions and interventions have a bigger effect. As mentioned earlier, more specific research needs to be done in this area to understand the impact of peer to peer support among these groups.

11. References

ASET (2009) 'A Good Guide for Placement and Other Work-Based Learning Opportunities in Higher Education' Retrieved on 2 June 2010, from www.asetonline.org

Black, A. (2005) 'The use of asynchronous discussion: Creating a text of talk'. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education* Vol.5 No.1, Retrieved on 21 March 2010 <http://www.citejournal.org/vol5/iss1/languagearts/article1.cfm>

Bryman, A. (2012) *Social Research Methods*, 4th ed., Oxford: Oxford university press

Demirbag Kaplan, M., Piskin, B. and Bol, B. (2010) 'Educational Blogging: Integrating Technology Into Marketing Experience' *Journal of Marketing Education* Vol.32, No.1, pp 50-63

Dictionary- Scott, J 2014, *A Dictionary Of Sociology*, n.p: Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2014

Driffield, N.L.; Foster, C.S. and Higson, H.E. (2011) 'Placements and degree performance: do placements lead to better marks, or do better students choose placements?' IN: *ASET annual conference 2011*. Siva-Jothy, Debbie (ed.) Sheffield (UK): ASET

Ertmer, P. A et al (2007) 'Using Peer Feedback to Enhance the Quality of Student Online Postings: An Explanatory Study' *Journal of Computing –Mediated Communication* Vol.12, Article 4 Retrieved on 21 March 2010 <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol12/issue2/ertmer.html>

Fellenz, M.R. (2006) 'Toward Fairness in Assessing Student Groupwork: A Protocol for Peer Evaluation of Individual Contributions' *Journal of Management Education* Vol.30, No.4, pp 570-591

Marmaros, D. and Sacerdote B. (2002) 'Peer and social networks in job search' *European Economic Review* Vol.46, pp 870-879

Mitchell E. (1986) Multiple Triangulation. A methodology of nursing science. *Advances in Nursing Science* 8(3): 18-26

Moore and Reddy (2011) 'Placement year academic benefit revisited: effects of demographics, prior achievement and degree programme' *Teaching in Higher Education* (153-165)

Ocker, R.J. and Yaverbaum, G.J. (1999) 'Asynchronous Computer-mediated Communication versus Face-to-face Collaboration: Results on Student Learning, Quality and Satisfaction' *Group Decision and Negotiation* Vol.8, pp 427-440

Patton, M. and Parron M, (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. 1st ed. Newbury Park, Calif,: Sage Publications.

Topping, K. (1998) 'Peer Assessment Between Students in Colleges and Universities' *Review of Educational Research*, Vol. 68, No.3, pp 249-276

APPENDIX 1

Second Years Student Support Questionnaire, 2017

1. **What school do you belong to?**
 - a. ABS
 - b. LSS
 - c. LHS
 - d. EAS
2. **Have you secured a placement?**
 - a. Yes
 - b. No, I am not going on placement
 - c. No, but I am still looking for one
3. **Have you accessed the Placements Support services?**
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
4. **If yes, which services have you used? (Select all that apply)**
 - a. One to one appointment
 - b. Sessions
 - c. Drop-ins
 - d. CV feedback
 - e. Mock interviews
 - f. Placement Fairs
 - g. Workshops
 - h. Peer-to-peer student advice, Placement Student Associates
 - i. Other (specify)
5. **Were you satisfied with support provided?**
 - a. Very satisfied
 - b. Satisfied
 - c. Somewhat satisfied
 - d. Not satisfied
6. **If no, what has prevented you from accessing Placement Support services?**

SPACE
7. **How would you rate the support out of ten received in a scale 1 to 10 (1 being lowest and 10 being highest)?**

SCALE FROM 1 TO 10
8. **Were you aware of the possibility to do a placement overseas (work and/or study)?**
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
9. **Have you thought about study placement overseas?**
 - a. Yes, I am going on one
 - b. Yes, but wasn't keen on the choice of partner universities
 - c. No, I haven't heard about this opportunity
 - d. Not interested in doing a Study Abroad Placement
10. **Have you thought about work placement overseas?**
 - a. Yes, I am going on one
 - b. Yes, but due to various circumstances I am not going to take a placement abroad

- c. No, I haven't heard about this opportunity
- d. Not interested in doing a work placement abroad

11. Do you feel that enough opportunities are provided on Aston Futures?

- a. Definitely yes
- b. Yes, but none of them interest me
- c. No

12. How beneficial would having digital video content about your placement options & process be to you?

- a. Very beneficial
- b. Somewhat beneficial
- c. Neither beneficial or not beneficial
- d. Not beneficial at all

13. Are you aware of financial support you might get if you go on a placement overseas?

- a. Yes
- b. No

14. Would you recommend Careers and Placement Service to your peers and if yes, please select all that apply?

- a. One to one appointment
- b. Sessions
- c. Drop-ins
- d. CV feedback
- e. Mock interviews
- f. Placement Fairs
- g. Workshops
- h. Peer-to-peer student advice, Placement Student Associates
- i. Other (specify)
- j. I would not recommend the Careers and Placements Survey

15. Please state why you would recommend the service? (If applicable)

SPACE

16. Please state why you would not recommend the service? (If applicable)

SPACE

APPENDIX 2

C+P Student Associates Focus Group, 2017

1. Brief introduction: name, degree title, current status (i.e. student, graduate, employed)
2. A little bit about your involvement as a Student Associate; what services and activities were you involved in?
3. From this experience, what went well?
4. What do you feel did not work well?
5. What was communication like between the Student Associates and C+P Staff? Any recommendations for improvement?
6. What was particularly useful for you as an Associate?
7. What did you enjoy as an Associate?
8. How do you feel about the recruitment process? Could it have been done differently?
9. How was the induction and the training process?
10. How do you feel about the service overall?
11. How has being an Associate helped you on your own development?
12. What impact do think you have made to the students you have supported?
13. How can we improve this programme and do you have any recommendations?
14. Would you have liked to use Social Media as a tool to promote C+P services to students, so that there is a student voice? Would having a “champion” per school work well?