ASET 2026 Practice Grant: Final Project Report

PREPARE: An Evidence-Based Placement Readiness Toolkit to Maximise Interpersonal Skill Development

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Summary

PREPARE (Placement Readiness through Evidence-based Personal and Academic Resilience Enhancement) is a toolkit to help students develop interpersonal skills before, during and after work-based placements. It was developed in response to two years of student and host evidence from six sport, rehabilitation and applied science programmes (364 student survey responses and 74 placement host evaluations), and a review of 22 open-access placement resources, which together showed a gap in practical, interactive and student-informed support. With ASET funding, the project team co-produced nine linked resources for students, academic staff and placement hosts, built an interactive web prototype, and presented the work at the 2026 ASET Conference. The toolkit is being made openly available on a dedicated website and will be piloted with students returning to placement https://learning.northumbria.ac.uk/prepare4placement/. The website will be launched on Monday 9th November 2026.

1. Introduction

Work placements are a well-established form of work-integrated learning, and formal work-integrated learning is rated by graduates as one of the most valuable activities for developing skills and relevant experience (Jackson and Bridgstock, 2021). Employers rank interpersonal, or “soft”, skills above technical knowledge, yet a gap persists between the skills graduates have and those employers expect (Succi and Canovi, 2020). In one study, most of 500 human resource managers reported that soft skills development was offered, but only 22% of 240 graduates said they had received it (Succi and Wieandt, 2019). Employers continue to identify leadership, adaptability and resilience as barriers to graduate recruitment (Lisá et al., 2019), and post-pandemic career anxiety may widen the gap (Qazi et al., 2024). Evidence on how placements develop these skills is thin in sport, exercise, rehabilitation and applied science programmes, and most studies rely on student self-report with little comparison to host views.

This project built on a prior study, “Knowing How” (Hibbs et al., under review), which used pre- and post-placement surveys and placement host evaluations to examine interpersonal skills across six programmes. Its findings suggested that students need more structured preparation for the interpersonal demands of placement. The ASET Practice Grant allowed the team to turn that evidence into practical resources. Our objectives were to:

- explore and identify gaps in current interpersonal skill development support for students;
- co-produce evidence-based resources with student input;
- develop and pilot the PREPARE toolkit; and

- disseminate the findings and resources to enhance placement experiences.

2. Methods

2.1 Evidence base

The evidence base was a repeated cross-sectional survey, approved by the university research ethics committee (Project #7919). Level 5 and Level 6 students in Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation and in Applied Sciences completed anonymous online surveys before placement (n = 269) or after placement (n = 95) between May 2024 and May 2026. Because responses were anonymous they could not be linked, so the pre- and post-placement groups are independent samples. Students rated 15 interpersonal skills from 1 (very poor) to 5 (outstanding) and answered questions about their expectations and reflections; 14 skills were asked at both timepoints. Placement hosts (employers and practice-based educators) were invited at the end of each placement year and 74 of 741 responded, rating students on 11 equivalent skills. Overall and skill-level ratings were compared using ANOVA and MANOVA, with timepoint, programme, study level and placement length (eight weeks or fewer versus more than eight weeks) as factors, and student and host ratings were compared for six matched skills. Table 1 shows student responses by programme.

Programme	Pre-placement	Post-placement	Total
Physiotherapy	33	32	65
Sport and exercise sciences	87	23	110
Sport, exercise and nutrition	33	9	42
Sports coaching	52	9	61
Sports management	54	8	62
Applied sciences	10	14	24
Overall	269	95	364

Table 1. Student survey responses by programme and timepoint.

2.2 Grey literature review

A review of open-access resources supporting students before and during placement was carried out, covering ASET resources, university placement webpages and handbooks, government guidance, and existing Northumbria materials. Twenty-two sources were reviewed and described by target audience, format, discipline specificity, interactivity and the extent of interpersonal skill content.

2.3 Co-production and toolkit development

Student voice shaped the toolkit in several ways. Quotations from student focus groups and a reflective account of a first placement by a physiotherapy student informed the student tips and advice resource, and feedback from a student co-creation meeting led to the inclusion of guidance on emotionally challenging situations and signposting to support services. Drafts of each resource were reviewed by colleagues in Physiotherapy, Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation, and Applied Sciences, and by the university employability team. The student researcher led the grey literature review and presented the project at the conference.

2.4 Digital development

Branching scenarios were written in two discipline-adapted sets (Applied Science and Physiotherapy), structured for build in Articulate Rise. In parallel, a single-file interactive website prototype was built so that students, academic staff and employers could each access relevant content, including field-specific context for each scenario and a choice between short and long placement guidance. A skills self-assessment tool covering seven skill areas was also developed.

3. Results

3.1 What the evidence showed

Students were optimistic before placement: 91% were confident of getting the most from it and 88% felt they had the interpersonal skills needed to succeed, although only 68% had no concerns. After placement, 88% said they had got the most from it, 89% were happy with the experience, and 76% and 75% reported positive effects on self-esteem and self-confidence. Overall interpersonal skill ratings were significantly higher in the post-placement sample (mean 4.12 out of 5) than in the pre-placement sample (3.80), a small to medium difference. Mean ratings were higher for all 14 skills, and the differences were clearest for willingness to communicate and oral communication with supervisory staff and with service users. Because the samples are unmatched, these differences describe groups rather than change in individual students, and the skill-level results beyond communication should be seen as exploratory.

Several findings pointed to where preparation could be strengthened. Only 59% of students agreed that their degree had prepared them sufficiently for all tasks asked of them on placement, and 15% disagreed. Students on placements longer than eight weeks rated themselves higher overall, particularly for communication with supervisors and service users, although they also rated themselves higher before placement, so longer placements cannot be shown to produce larger gains. Physiotherapy students rated their communication higher than some other programmes. Confidence to suggest ideas and tolerance for stress were rated lowest by students at both timepoints.

Hosts rated all 11 skills above 4 out of 5, and rated students higher than students rated themselves on all six matched skills, though only two of these differences were statistically significant and neither remained so after adjustment for multiple tests. Leadership received the lowest host rating (4.10) and the widest spread, with 19% of hosts rating it average or below, followed by asking for help, using initiative and seeking feedback (4.19). Leadership was also among the lowest matched self-ratings. Table 2 shows how these findings shaped the toolkit.

Evidence	Toolkit response
Only 59% felt their degree prepared them for placement tasks	Reflective toolkit, communication and adaptability scenarios, placement support sheet
Higher ratings among students on placements longer than eight weeks	Placement support sheet with separate short and long placement guidance, to help students make the most of limited time
Leadership rated lowest by hosts and low in student self-ratings	Leadership activity (goal setting and development steps); advice for employers on creating leadership opportunities
Help-seeking and initiative rated second lowest by hosts; students	Advice for employers on encouraging proactive communication; scenarios on team meetings, mistakes and

Evidence	Toolkit response
least confident about suggesting ideas and tolerating stress	unexpected change; student tips; signposting for emotionally challenging situations
Differences between programmes in communication	Discipline-specific scenario sets and field-specific examples for Physiotherapy, Sports Science and Applied Science

Table 2. Evidence from the "Knowing How" study and how it shaped PREPARE.

3.2 What the grey literature review showed

Of the 22 resources reviewed, 16 were aimed at students and six at employers or placement managers. Fifteen were web pages, six were PDFs and one was a report. Only three were tailored to healthcare students, so most provision was generic, although limited access to programme-specific materials from other institutions means this should be interpreted cautiously. Student experiences, usually as quotations, blogs or videos, were a common feature. Interactivity varied widely; one university offered an editable PDF toolkit, but its focus was wellbeing rather than interpersonal skill development. Overall, resources tended to describe interpersonal skills rather than provide practical, peer-informed ways to develop them.

3.3 The PREPARE toolkit

The project produced nine resources, summarised in Table 3. Each is designed to be used independently, so students can engage without relying on scheduled teaching time.

Resource	Purpose
1. Interpersonal skills infographic	Definitions, placement examples and practical tips for eight interpersonal skills
2. Student placement tips and advice	Real-life experiences and practical advice drawn from student quotes and reflections
3. Reflective toolkit	Guided reflection before, during and after placement, with a student and employer skills rating
4. Communication and adaptability scenarios	Interactive branching workplace scenarios: contributing to a team meeting, managing a challenging conversation, a schedule change, and making a mistake
5. Placement support sheet	Practical guidance for short and long placements, with signposting to support
6. Leadership activity	Leadership styles, opportunities and a SMART leadership goal with development steps
7. Advice for employability academics	Check-ins, structured conversation and coaching frameworks (GROW, BATHE) and signposting
8. Advice for employers	Supporting leadership, help-seeking and initiative, and effective induction and mentoring
9. Research findings infographic	Key student and host findings and the rationale for the toolkit

Table 3. The nine PREPARE resources.

The scenarios deliberately avoid labelling options as right or wrong on screen. Students first type what they would do, then choose an option and explore outcomes and implications, keeping the tone reflective rather than evaluative. This fits evidence that structured pre-

placement preparation, including simulated practice, can help build foundational communication skills (Rossiter et al., 2023).

4. Dissemination

The project was presented as a poster and a conference presentation at the 2026 ASET Conference on 8 September 2026. The underlying “Knowing How” findings were presented at the Higher Education Sport Pedagogy Conference in September 2025 and have been submitted for peer review to the International Journal of Work-Integrated. The toolkit will be released openly on a dedicated PREPARE website, allowing use by students, staff and placement hosts at Northumbria and across the ASET network. This report will also be published on the ASET website. ASET is acknowledged as funder of this work and will be referenced in all future outputs.

5. Discussion

The project achieved its main aim of translating survey and host evidence into a practical, interactive toolkit. A particular strength is the convergence of evidence: students’ reports of incomplete preparation, the grey literature gap, and hosts’ ratings of leadership and help-seeking all pointed to the same areas of need. Student voice is built into the resources, which matters given the review’s finding that peer perspectives are valued but rarely paired with developmental activities. The evidence also shaped what the toolkit does not assume. Students rated their readiness highly before placement, so the resources are framed as supporting reflection and confidence rather than correcting a deficit, and the placement guidance recognises that duration alone is unlikely to be the answer: longer placements are not necessarily better (Jerez Gomez et al., 2023), so well-supported short placements matter.

There are limitations. The survey evidence is self-reported, anonymous and unmatched, post-placement responses were far fewer than pre-placement responses, and some programme groups were small, so differences may reflect who chose to respond. The study took place at a single university, and the host response rate was about 10%. The toolkit has not yet been tested with students, so this report describes its development rather than its effectiveness. The grey literature review covers open-access resources only and may under-represent programme-specific materials held within institutions.

6. Conclusion and next steps

PREPARE brings together evidence, practical resources, student voice and academic and host perspectives to make interpersonal skill development a more supported part of the placement experience. Next steps are to:

- pilot the toolkit with students returning to placement;
- gather feedback on relevance, usability, accessibility and value, and use it to refine the resources;
- launch the dedicated website; and
- extend access beyond Northumbria through the ASET network.

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