Work placements in History of Art and Architectural History

The work placement programme aim is to introduce students to a working environment related to their study of art and architectural history and each year approximately 20 students elect to take this option as part of their third year studies, working in museums, commercial or public galleries, and heritage organisations.

**School/Subject Area:** Edinburgh College of Art

**Target Audience:**Year 3 undergraduate History of Art and Architectural History students electing to undertake a work placement in Semester 1

**Staff Involved:** academic staff (Course Organiser; tutor) with input from Careers Adviser

**Dates/timings:** Two meetings in Semester 1

Key features

The work placement programme has been running successfully since the academic session 1990-91. Its aim is to introduce students to a working environment related to their study of art and architectural history and each year approximately 20 students elect to take this option as part of their third year studies, working in museums, commercial or public galleries, and heritage organisations. It is a piece of formally assessed project work, worth 40 credits, and students are on placement in their host institution for two days per week for 11 weeks in Semester 1.

The course organiser, student and host institution draw up a Learning Agreement at an initial meeting that outlines the main types of activity, including appropriately-related tasks, expected from the student by the host.

After the placement, students submit a work placement report, usually between 8,000 and 10,000 words. More than half of this has an academic focus but roughly one quarter takes the form of a record of autonomous learning where the student is encouraged to include a critical analysis of what has been learnt as well as the process of learning. The student’s work placement diary is likely to be a major source for this section.

Planning and supervision

The course organiser sets up all the placements, using a combination of long standing and new host institutions. Most students work under the supervision of a member of staff in the host institution. Some students carry out independent research projects on behalf of an institution (for example the Vivat Trust or the Cockburn Trust) and they are supervised by an academic tutor.

Working together, the Course Organiser and Careers Adviser have two one-hour meetings with the group of placement students, occurring just before the start of the placement and mid-way through.

Project

The first meeting is a mix of input from the Careers Adviser and academic staff with small groups and a plenary discussion.

As well as ironing out any administrative problems, this meeting is used to encourage students to think about and discuss what they hope to gain from the placement in terms of skills, experience and insights into their individual learning styles, the organisation in particular and the museums, galleries and heritage sector in general. They also identify the possible longer term career benefits – enhancing their CVs, networking, making future contacts or simply knowing if this is an area of work they would wish to pursue.

As well as seeing the placement as having mutual benefit to them and the employer, students are actively encouraged to take charge of their learning objectives and to recognise that this style of autonomous learning is part and parcel of the modern workplace, where employees are increasingly responsible for directing their own personal and career development.

As part of the process of autonomous learning, students are asked to complete a Skills Audit at this point. In true ‘before and after’ fashion, they then re-do this at the end of the placement, highlighting what they have achieved and areas they may need to develop/work on.

The second meeting (mid-placement review) builds on the earlier meeting. Individually, in small groups and plenary, students share their work placement experiences, which are generally very positive. There is opportunity to reflect on knowledge, skills, experience and insights they have gained so far and to consider how best to optimise the remaining weeks with their host institution. The tutors and Careers Adviser also use the end of this session to answer any questions about completing the Work Placement Report.

Resources

Academic staff time in developing good links with host institutions, making placement arrangements and communicating with employers and students.

Careers Adviser staff time in contributing to meetings, preparing Skills Audit and notes of how to structure the Record of Autonomous Learning

Evaluation

The work placement programme provides students a unique opportunity to gain knowledge and experience of the workings of an organisation active at the interface of the academic and professional worlds, to gain an insight into the applicability of their academic skills and the reality of this in today’s art world.

Participants also develop practical skills and abilities in the organisation and management of their project, and the communication of its progress and results.  Analytical skills are honed through the investigation, interpretation and evaluation of evidence that is required in the creation of the work placement report.

The actual work may vary considerably from placement to placement and may range from intensive, work placement-based activity over Semester 1, followed by report-writing in Semester 2, to research-based work paced over the academic year to suit both the host and the student.  Whatever the precise format, the students benefit from a distinctive and formal piece of work experience that contributes to their understanding of themselves, the art world and the realities of operating within it, continually applying and developing their knowledge, skills and attributes.

Advice

The academic department organises all the work placements but actively involves the Careers Service in preparing the students to make the most of the experience. This shared approach helps students capitalise on both the academic and vocational benefits of the placement.

For the future, it may be helpful to use an electronic mechanism, for example the [TATA model](http://www.employability.ed.ac.uk/CaseStudies/LLC-TATA.htm) developed for LLC, to allow students to record and reflect on the progress of their placement.

Key contacts

[Dr Claudia Heide](mailto:c.heide@ed.ac.uk), Course Organiser

[Dr John Lowrey](mailto:j.lowrey@ed.ac.uk), Supervisor of research-based work placements

[Steve Norman](mailto:Steve.Norman@ed.ac.uk), Careers Adviser

<http://www.ed.ac.uk/employability/staff-information/how-employability-addressed/good-practice/hss/work-placements>