

Situation description on Practical Placements in the United Kingdom

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Practical placements (PPs) in the UK are effectively regulated by Chapter 9 – Work-based and Placement Learning – of the Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, issued by The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education September 2007. They are generally supported by the ASET (Association of Sandwich Education & Training) guidelines, A Good Practice Guide for Placement and Other Work-Based Learning Opportunities in Higher Education, Version 2.1 was issued March 2009. Although the QAA document is not legally binding, it is very strongly recommended and most universities in the UK abide by its standards. UK universities vary dramatically in their use of PPs. The differences can be broken down between the pre 1992 Universities that offer a very traditional style of research-based higher education with limited opportunities for placements and the post 1992 universities, which were originally Polytechnics and offer placements in many of their courses particularly in Business, Engineering, Health, Information Technology and Travel. PPs are not compulsory other than in the Health Sector, but are generally strongly recommended.

The length of time a student spends at a company varies with the subject area, Business and Health placements are often as short as 12 weeks whereas Engineering placements vary from 24 – 48 weeks and IT and travel placements are generally 48 weeks. Only PPs in the Arts are less than 12 weeks.

How the PP is evaluated can vary from subject to subject even within one university. The majority of placements are marked by a visiting academic from the university and by the company where the student is placed. However the final mark is either pass or fail as this allows the university control over the final marking without having to quality assess the marking of the companies. Some universities have additional modules to allow the student to write a longer reflection with a presentation at the end to the visit tutor and the academic head of the placements unit. This can be marked as per any other module and included in the student's degree classification.

PPs in the UK can be classified into different areas dependent on subject, most Engineering, Business, Travel and IT PPs are enterprise driven with the company either coming to the university and advertising directly to the

students via a specific notice board or web site, the contract is then made between the student and the company, but is for a limited period of time. The university still maintains a duty of care over the student by ensuring that the company meets the normal employment legislation and Health and Safety standards. Health PPS are University driven with the University initiating links with hospitals and specifying key skills that need to be covered.

Checking the quality of the Placement.

Before students go onto placement, the type of work they are to be doing and the company where they are going to be employed by is checked by an academic, from the university, who specialises in that subject area. Most universities will also send out a university tutor at least once during the PP period to check what the student is doing and that the company is treating the student fairly. Most University placement units belong to the *Placenet* online network. The network allows universities to check if a company has had placement problems by requesting information from other placement units in the UK. <www.placenet.org.uk>

Over the last few years a number of universities have been offering 'self employed placements' where a student or students (never more than 3) are offered support to start up their own business during the placement period. This is leading to a number of new companies continuing when the student(s) have completed their studies.