**Matching and mismatch: understanding employer expectations of work placement applicants**

**Author 1[[1]](#footnote-1)[[2]](#footnote-2)**

Department *or Centre, Institution*

**Author 2**

Department or Centre, Institution

The success and sustainability of work-integrated learning (WIL) is an abiding concern for universities, as institutions seek to mainstream WIL within academic programmes. A supply of placement opportunities, and students successfully being appointed to opportunities, is fundamental to sustainability. This paper focuses on employer perspectives on WIL, looking beyond often-reported challenges of supply and demand to examine decision-making processes around placement. Data collection is undertaken via unique access to a region-wide placement project, e-Placement Scotland, which promotes paid, quality placement opportunities to computing students throughout Scotland. Analysis of operational data from the project shows patterns of student applications and appointments. Thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with six employers in small and medium sized enterprises is used to explore their perspectives and identify the issues that affect their decision making when offering placement roles, and appointing students to those roles. Findings are reported under six key themes; ‘improvisation’, ‘business positioning’, ‘skills focus’, ‘initiative and self-management’, ‘company focus’, and ‘making the appointment’. The findings can be used to strengthen university-employer connections through providing insights into employer priorities, and how their particular contexts affect priorities, particularly with regard to small and medium sized employers.

**Keywords:** student placement, employer expectations, applications, employer engagement

# Background

That students gain employability skills while on a placement (also known as work-integrated learning) is not in doubt, indeed it has been argued that relevant work experience is one of the main contributory factors in gaining graduate employment (Hall et al, 2009; High Fliers, 2013; Mason et al, 2006). In the UK the number of students having the opportunity to undertake a ‘traditional’ one-year placement during their studies has declined, because of reduced employer and student demand (Wilson, 2012). Since 2010, e-Placement Scotland has created over 1300 paid placements, which students across all 12 university departments offering computer science programmes in Scotland can apply for. This paper examines patterns of student engagement, uptake and use of e-Placement Scotland and then goes on to investigate employer perspectives around offering placements; the ways in which employers develop job descriptions, shortlist applicants and appoint candidates is explored. Lessons are set out both for the project and for broader WIL practice, with a view to maximising the number of filled placement roles.

# Research aims and intent

The overall aim of the paper is to understand the employer-side placement recruitment experience in order to better delineate any mismatch between employer expectations and student applications, to determine ways to improve both preparation activity for pre-placement students and the ‘fill rate’ of placement roles. A critical realist approach was adopted, with its commitment to observing interactions between power structures, resulting events and individual experiences (Archer et al., 2013), and informed a research approach drawing upon quantitative and qualitative data in order to explore ‘What matters to employers when aiming to recruit a placement student?’

# Methods

Access to the e-Placement Scotland project enabled the collection and analysis of operational project data. The project has a recruitment website (e-placementscotland.com) to advertise pre-approved placement roles. Students register, upload a CV and apply for roles. The site has advertised over 1200 roles with over 3000 student registrations. Quantitative analysis of project data was used to identify patterns of uptake and use of the project by students and employers. Data from 2010-2014 highlights employer preferences for skills and length of placement, year of study, age and gender. To explore some of the factors that contextualise these placement patterns, a sample of six SME employers providing placement roles within the last 12 months was then selected, and semi-structured telephone interviews carried out. The aim was to surface and explore employer approaches to the placement process normally hidden, from assembling the role description through to shortlisting and appointment. Data was transcribed and thematic analysis undertaken.

# Results and discussion

**What are the characteristics of filled placement roles via e-Placement Scotland?**

Data relating to employer engagement in the project is detailed below in Table 1. These include; the sector and the size of companies using e-Placement, preferred placement length and salaries.

Table 1: Organisation size, length of placement and salaries

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Over half of the placements are for 3 months, running over the summer. Student availability over this period guarantees employers a good pool of applicants, however, some employers have expressed a preference for longer placements to ensure a return on investment in induction and training (for example, Smith et al., 2015). SMEs provided 53% of placements.

Students register and upload a CV before applying for roles. When a student accepts an offer their data is anonymously recorded to generate a placed student report so that a comparison can be made between students who register and those who have successfully applied for roles. The demographic data for those students who were successfully in applying for and being appointed to a placement role (‘placed’) is given in Table 2.

Table 2: Profile of placed students: age, gender and level of study

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Demographic data for those students who had not yet been successfully placed is given in Table 3.

Table 3: Profile of registered but not yet placed students: age, gender and level of study

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Placed students are on average older than registered students (see Tables 2 and 3). Students aged 23 and above may have had some previous work experience, commonly thought to be beneficial in securing a work placement. Although female students secured only 26% of roles, in computing they make up 27% of the student population (HESA, 2014) and so the figures are proportionate. Indeed as 22% of registered students were female, women would appear to be more successful than men in securing a placement. Data suggests employer preference for placing third year students who have a wide range of skills. This is mirrored, however, by higher application rates from third years compared to second years.

**What matters to employers when aiming to recruit a placement student?**

Interviews focused upon employers’ process of developing the placement role description, the balance required between technical skills and personal attributes, the shortlisting process and how a decision to appoint was made. Post-coding was then applied to the data and emergent issues aggregated around themes. Six themes were discerned, relating to organisational capacity and strategy as well as perceptions of applicants.

*Improvisation: recognising the learning curve*

This theme highlights improvisation as an element of the process, perhaps particularly affecting SMEs who recruit sporadically. Experience in writing job specs is often limited; “the CTO had some experience of this, he managed his own company before so he knows what should have been in it” (Participant 2), and the examples provided on the e-Placement Scotland website were used as a resource; “we looked at what e-Placement Scotland ads were before, and there was a ‘template’” (Participant 2).

*Business positioning*

Employers appreciate that they compete for the ‘best’ students and for each employer the role description was developed with this in mind. For Participant 4, working in a small start-up, the role descriptor offered a chance to explain what the company did and “try to convince [the student] that this is a company they should want to be considering”. The placement advert therefore forms a dual function – setting out the role specification, but also articulating the company proposition for the applicant to attract the applicant towards a company that may have little name recognition.

*Skills focus: skills as ‘gateway’*

The third theme from the data relates to the technical skills focus evident during the role descriptor writing, shortlisting and interview processes. To some extent the technical skills defined reflect what already works for the company; “the job spec is basically a description of what our current staff look like. Familiarity with some languages is a giveaway that they will like working here” (Participant 1). Employers need to be convinced that, if a student lacks a particular programming language or technique, they will be able to pick it up without too much support from colleagues – ability to learn is valued. Employers seemed satisfied that students were reading the role descriptors before applying, and had the required baseline skills.

*Initiative and self-management*

Employers were looking for attributes other than specific technical skills, and this came through at more than one point in each interview. Online portfolios of work was seen as very positive in this context and as a sign of initiative and ambition; “someone can have a great CV but I could pay £10 right now and someone could make me a good CV – so it’s about online presence as well. So if you type their name or email address into Google….one of the candidates had 15,000 twitter followers” (Participant 2). Effort put into writing a covering letter was also seen as a sign of initiative, showing personal motivation towards getting the role (Participants 3 and 5).

A degree of self-management was seen as a key attribute; “we’re looking for technical skills, definitely, but also someone who will ask questions, someone who will take a bit of responsibility, initiative and communication skills as well as good technical skills. The world of work is changing and our software developers talk to our clients sometimes” (Participant 3). The need for students to stand out and be distinctive was emphasised; “everyone has done the same student project – we’re looking for something that sets them apart a little. For example, programming projects that they’ve pursued in their own time” (Participant 5).

Employers were also keen that applicants should have some experience of the world of work via for example an existing part-time job, though the type of work was not considered important; “we wanted evidence of work experience – no work experience is certainly a negative at shortlisting. Didn’t matter what it was. The fact they could show up for work day after day, that’s all I expected” (Participant 1). Again, this is likely to be a reflection of the fact that SMEs, with a small headcount and lack of formal processes and procedures for training, have a need for applicants to be work-ready and not require significant ‘on-boarding’.

*Company Focus*

Employers wanted to see students display a positive attitude towards working for that company, for example through a tailored CV showing how the applicant meets the job specification. By interview stage, employers wanted students to have researched the company; “we wanted students to be knowledgeable about the company – I had no expectations but it helped a lot” (Participant 1). For other participants this was expressed as a means of differentiating candidates with similar skillsets, and used as a proxy for motivation; however none of the participants used a lack of knowledge of the company solely as a means to rule out an applicant.

*Making the appointment*

The sub-themes to emerge from the selection process were based on student performance at the interview: ‘going beyond the brief’ and ‘face-fitting’. Not all participants had found a successful match, however Participant 1 shared insights leading to a recruitment decision; “he was able to talk at length and it wasn’t in the job advert – his course had covered that”. In this case the differentiator with students on the same course was related to the student’s wider knowledge of the technology sector. This sector knowledge was also used to infer interest, being keen to learn and taking enjoyment in work. However there were also culture-based influences summarised as face-fitting; “I felt I could work with him” (Participant 1).

# Conclusion and implications

The overall goal of the paper was to better understand the gap between employer expectations and applications to contextualise the project data on students relating to placed and unplaced students. Encouraging and supporting employers to offer placements takes significant effort, and applying for placements takes time, determination and resilience on the part of students, so that unfilled placements represent significant wasted resource.

The study highlights ‘improvisation’ as part of the employer experience, and it seems likely that employers would benefit from support to produce role descriptors that define their baseline skills needs while recognising that students who may not currently reach this are capable of learning on the job. Similarly, where ‘business positioning’ is a component of the job advert, a balance may be required between setting out an aspirational vision for the business and the possibility that students may doubt their own ability to contribute to this, and be put off from applying. Conversely, students should be reassured about the value that employers place on their current work experience, even if part-time and unrelated to the technical domain.

The extent to which ‘company focus’ determines a good outcome for placement applications is worth further consideration. While in an ideal world students might extensively research each company they apply to, practical considerations make this impossible. However, it is certainly the case that developing an online footprint showcasing their own skills to complement their CV might effectively demonstrate the initiative that employers seem to be looking for.

The outcomes of this study have implications for the support offered to employers entering the placement marketplace and for the pre-placement preparation activities that universities deliver to students, as well as for those responsible for giving students feedback on unsuccessful applications. The next step is to explore student reading, interpretation and recognition of role descriptors to better understand student approaches to the application process.

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1. Corresponding author contact details; Department, Institution, International telephone number, contact email address. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. To allow for blind reviewing, please only include author details in the final submission. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)