

The Placement Network: Online Peer Community Pilot



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Purpose

The Placement Network was developed to support students transition to their yearlong placement by providing a peer-to-peer community to help retain their sense of belonging with the university during the year.

Students undertaking a placement have a significant transition into the world of work & then back into the University. They also have similar challenges, issues, experiences through this transition. This aligns with the principles summarised in the resource [Mentoring and Peer Learning: Setting Up a Scheme in HE](#). To identify the focal point of transition for the students, their shared practices or interests, and the differential in knowledge and experience around which the peer interaction will revolve.

This case study outlines learnings from the pilot and reports on next steps for the future of The Placement Network.

Description

The Placement Network was developed as a new online space designed to bring together all DMU students who are on optional yearlong placements. To share their experiences, ask questions, offer advice, and communicate with one another. It was designed to help placement students make new connections in a social online community space.

The placement student group was chosen in line with the principles noted above - the importance of the transition point involved (moving out of the university environment and into the world of work); their shared interests (the placement experience); and the potential to also include students who had already undertaken a placement to interact with those who were just starting that process (that is, where the students involved have a clear differential in knowledge and experience that would drive interaction).

Work placement transitions are twofold; transitioning from university to work and from work back into university. Dawson (2024) noted the importance of not just preparing students for placement but also in placement & in transition back to university. Students can feel daunted, recognising the shift from being part of a programme cohort with shared activity and goals to moving into an environment where they

may be the only student at a workplace with new work-based peers, cultures and environments as well as concerns around how they may then reintegrate back into their course.

'My main concern is about going back to my course and having a hard time making friends again.'
(Student survey response)

Whilst placement briefings are provided by university placement tutors to support transition, maintaining a sense of community outside of existing social groups can be challenging without the social spaces and opportunities a university community can provide. This is supported by the work of McBeath et al (2017) which highlights the importance of a well-developed peer network in transitioning in and out of university, recognising the disconnection often felt when students are away from campus.

The primary university connection students have during their placement year is with their placement tutor, so unless students are in a workplace environment with other students their sense of remaining part of a university community can be constrained. The intention of The Placement Network was to allow students to share challenges, make new connections, develop a peer network and maintain a sense of university community.

A number of platforms were considered for the pilot. The scope was restricted to platforms familiar to students, in line with prior internal student led research into peer communities recognised new platforms were a barrier to engagement. WhatsApp was considered but discounted due to GDPR issues, VLE discussions boards were discounted as it inhibited flexibility in bringing together all students, as each faculty has its own distinct faculty-based VLE placement module shell, and the aim was to create a cross-university group. After further consideration the network was hosted on MTeams to align with the widespread use of the platform in both university and work.

The principles followed for the development of the pilot are documented in the resource [Online Peer Communities Decision Tree](#).

The site was introduced to students via a VLE announcement and a MTeams welcome post describing the aims & purpose of the network, along with a user guidance document detailing 'How to use the site'; which suggested students ask questions, reach out for advice, connect with students in the same location or industry area, and share experiences whilst on placement. We also requested any ongoing feedback to help develop the site further. We provided tips reaffirming the purpose of the platform, boundaries and the importance of respectful behaviours.

To provide the differential in knowledge eight final year students who had returned from placement joined the site. These represented voices from across the faculties. Each introduced themselves, their course, their placement position and prior employer and offered support, tips and general advice.

The existing dedicated university placement tutors, whose role is to support students academically and pastorally on placement, were enrolled as moderators. This was to ensure appropriate behaviours on the site but also to ensure the site wasn't subject to any misinformation about placement academic requirements, (albeit their purpose was not to interact or post unless necessary). Staff responded positively to the idea and supported with communications as requested however a greater sense of collective ownership may have encouraged greater advocacy for the site.

Outcomes of activity

The Placement Network was relatively easy to set up once we had appropriate IT support to create the MS Teams site and populate it with users. Interacting with the site was straightforward noting institutional familiarity with MS Teams.

The site however didn't gain the student engagement levels we had hoped for in setting up this pilot. Whilst the returning placement students did positively engage as requested, the current placement students only reacted to posts or responded to polls from returning placement students. No existing placement students posted to the site.

A short survey was conducted to explore the reasons. This had a limited number of responses however it did provide some useful insight. It was clear there was limited awareness of the MS Teams site. As a result, students had also missed the network guide which had been produced to accompany the site. Where students were aware, reasons for this lack of engagement included forgetting about the site, getting busy at work or not engaging due to limited activity on the site.

There were mixed responses to whether having placement tutors as moderators would impact their interaction with the network.

'I think slightly as people may be scared to be informal.'

Students reported greater awareness/communication, face to face meetings and more activity on the site would have encouraged more interaction.

When asked 'Do you think the Placement Network can offer a valuable space to help and support your transition to and from a placement by creating a placement community?' All respondents responded positively illustrating the potential value of the network.

Impact on Students

As participation was low, the impact on the students involved in the pilot was minimal. Nevertheless, the pilot provided a starting point for future developments. Students on placement were at least made aware that there was a forum for interaction with other placement students by placement tutors, and this may have had some positive impact in terms of the possibility of connection with others, even if that wasn't realised in practice through interaction in the MS Teams site.

The Placement Network survey helped us recognise student concerns around their placement year which will be fed into future placement activity to improve ongoing support. These included anxieties around relocation and re integrating with the course on return.

Institutional Impact

Whilst the pilot didn't meet its objective, we will be maintaining the site and re invigorating this for the coming set of students to go into placement (June -September 2025). The logistics of creating the site and populating it with appropriate users has been established and that approach may be replicated. The approach is sustainable as it has a relative low resource model, with returning placement students volunteering to be part of the site and moderation coming from tutors with existing responsibility for students on placement. The network utilised an existing platform therefore there was no additional cost for the site or training as all student respondents reported confidence in using MS Teams.

This initial pilot has also informed our thinking for wider institutional work on student retention.

Next Steps

The pilot has been incredibly helpful in providing some very clear 'lessons learned'. An improved co-created version of The Placement Network is planned which includes developing greater placement tutor engagement and agency in supporting the network. The timing of our next placement cohort will facilitate a longer lead time to build awareness of the network and its purpose across our students. Adding informal tutor led sessions to introduce the network were supported by student feedback. As

were student-led sessions to talk about challenges faced on placement. Further review and evaluation will take place to monitor future success.

The approach provides a useful model for wider implementation providing the appropriate awareness and understanding of an online community is considered. See our peer community project resources for further advice and guidance.

Further Resources

Dawson, P (2024) *Transitioning into and out of Work Placements*, The Economics Network
<https://doi.org/10.53593/n4117a>

McBeath, M., Drysdale, M. T. B., & Bohn, N. (2018). Work-integrated learning and the importance of peer support and sense of belonging. *Education & Training*, 60(1), 39–53. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ET-05-2017-0070>

Useful Resources

[*Mentoring and Peer Learning: Setting Up a Scheme in HE*](#)
[*Online Peer Communities Decision Tree*](#)
