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# Technology Enhanced Food Industry Engagement and Work Placement Curriculum Quality Assurance

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## **Abstract**

Several years on from the publication of the ‘*Roadmap for Academic-Employment Partnerships (REAP) Work-placement in Third Level-Programmes*’ report (Sheridan & Linehan, 2011), this presentation will describe the use of technology in the design and implementation of a quality curriculum model for validated work-placement modules in several Food BSc Programmes in Technological University Dublin. The success of the curriculum design has been largely because of the judicious use of technology firstly to manage the complex process of placing individual students in an appropriate role within a suitable industry, secondly to quality assure the student learning outcomes for an industry-based learning environment, and thirdly to enhance the assessment and feedback both of core competencies and graduate attributes. The technologies utilised include several of the *Google Apps* from the *G Suite* (*GoogleForms*, *GoogleSheets*, *GoogleDocs*, *GoogleDrive*), as well as the blog tool in the *Blackboard VLE*.

Key learning points:

1. Technology has improved the management of the work-placement process, from generating ample high-quality and relevant placement opportunities, increasing productivity through better collaboration and communication.
2. Technology has guaranteed the quality of the placement, from defining suitable learning activities, through to the creation of individualised Learning Agreements.
3. The online reflective blog assessments support students' reflection on learning, as well as fostering a community of learning amongst peer groups.

## **Introduction**

A recent report has identified several challenges and barriers from the employer perspective that can limit their ability to engage with work-placement (Jackson, Rowbottom, Ferns, & McLarend, 2017). These include a lack of shared understanding between the University and Industry of what is involved in work-placement; misalignment between employer and university expectations on the purpose and nature of the placement experience, especially what constitutes a quality placement and how this can be achieved; and ability to locate a suitable student. Additionally, not being approached by Universities and/or access to relevant University who arrange work-placements can be problematic. For unstructured work-placements, identifying suitable projects for students to undertake was found to be a considerable challenge. Recommendations to the University to reduce such barriers centre around developing collaborative relationships.

In Ireland, specific guidelines to facilitate quality work-placement have been compiled in the '*Roadmap for Academic-Employment Partnerships (REAP) Work-placement in Third Level-Programmes*' report (Sheridan & Linehan, 2011), and focus mainly on communications, learning agreements, mentoring practices, student selection processes, reflection on practice, and assessment and feedback mechanisms.

This paper will set out how the recommendations of the REAP report for work-placement were realised in TU Dublin Food related programmes, and the important role that technology played in this process.

## **Methods**

### **Part 1: Before Placement - Curriculum Design and Management**

The first step to a successful placement is clearly establishing the range of learning activities that constitute a quality work-placement. For diverse industries, a mechanism to define what a particular company can, and cannot, offer to the student, is also required.

#### **Step 1 - Securing and advertising a wide range of suitable placement opportunities**

To secure a range of well-defined and suitable placement opportunities, an electronic booklet was developed that explained the Programme and Module Learning Outcomes and the type of suitable roles and tasks within a company. A *GoogleForm* mirrored the information in the booklet and the link was available to work-placement coordinators to circulate via email, LinkedIn, and to Food industry representative groups such as associations and state bodies.

Mandatory questions in the *GoogleForm* included contact details, location, work times, student application processes, etc. to gather logistical information. However, more importantly from a curriculum quality perspective, it listed areas of focus for suitable activities in a mandatory tick-box question. Completing the form generated a line in a *GoogleSheet*, and a Word document that contained all the relevant information about the work-placement offered. Once approved by the placement tutor, these documents were released as '*Placement advertisements*'. In this manner, a wide range of clearly defined opportunities were generated more easily than in previous years, rapidly

expanding our network of industries offering placements, as well as the diversity of opportunities from which students could choose.

### **Step 2: Student selection**

The application process was managed by the Placement tutor, who shared to the students the *GoogleSheet* that listed all the placement opportunities. Students indicated when they had opted to apply for a position, and when they were successful in securing a placement. In most cases, the companies selected the students, either from applicant CVs, or through a more formal interview process. In other cases, the School was requested by the company to select a suitable student.

### **Step 3: Creating a Unique Learning Agreement**

Once a student was successfully appointed to a placement, the student used the information from the specific '*Placement advertisement*' document to create a unique '*Learning Agreement*' document, which mirrored the *Placement Advertisement*, and contained a student Code of Conduct and a section for review and feedback. The purpose of the Learning Agreement was to provide quality assurance that (1) the company would provide the relevant experiences as specified by them when completing the Google-form, (2) the student would clearly understand the areas of focus and the relevant skills they would be expected to develop, (3) a mechanism for structured mentoring, feedback and assessment was set out, and (4) provided guidance to all parties on how to deal with issues such as under-performance and unprofessional behaviour.

## **Part 2. Placement assessment and feedback**

### **Learning Agreement - Assessment and feedback on practical skills and knowledge**

Once on placement, the Learning Agreement was used to structure a mid-placement performance review. It included a space for documenting the mid-placement review, with each of the areas of focus/skills listed, and a section on 'progress to date'. It also provided for a final pass/fail assessment and feedback by the industry supervisor on the student's development of each of the specified knowledge and skills.

### **Reflective Practice and developing a Community of Learning through an online Blog Assessment**

A blog assessment was implemented to actively encourage reflection and also foster peer-peer learning through providing an opportunity to share experiences of the diverse range of activities during work-placement. The aim of the blog assessment is (1) to utilise a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) to provide an effective online learning space to foster a community of learning for work-placement students; (2) to engage students in collaborative learning, encouraging deeper analysis and critical thinking (3) to enhance career development through sharing work-placement activities (4) to provide student friendly peer and tutor support while isolated from college on placement, thus supporting student retention; (5) to provide timely tutor feedback and peer review on assessment; (6) to enhance professional development through reflection on practice and written communication; (7) to broaden the curriculum through gaining, sharing and discussing external perspectives on core knowledge gained in theoretical modules. A full description of the

implementation and evaluation on this assessment has been described previously (J. Dunne & Ryan, 2016).

## Findings

### Evaluation of Technology to support high quality work-placement:

The use of Google Suite apps to manage and assure quality of work placement is shown in Figure 1.

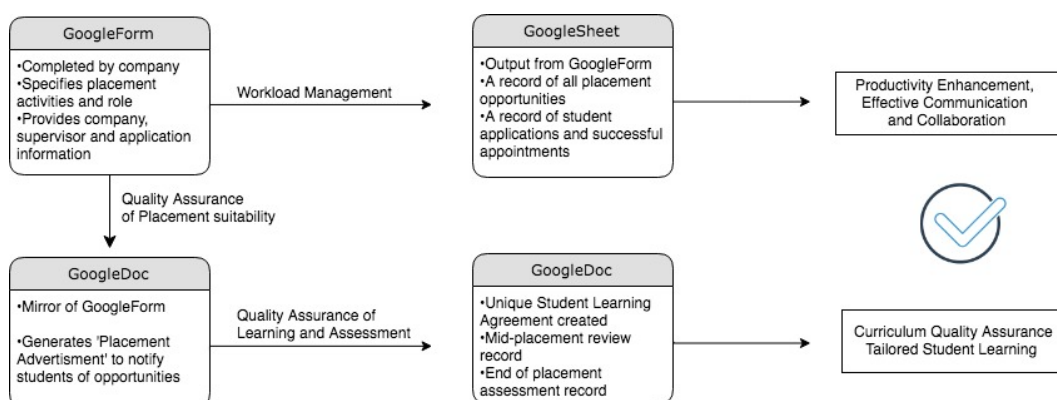


Figure 1. Overview of *Google Apps* in Food Industry Work-Placement curriculum

- The technology was successfully adopted by all work-placement stakeholders - tutors, students and companies.
- Companies could identify the type of learning activities that are relevant to the student on work-placement giving confidence to the company that they were a suitable organisation to support a student on placement;
- Companies could select from a range of suitable activities to build a bespoke work-placement that is suited both to the company and the student;
- Our range of companies and types of opportunities was rapidly expanded;
- The students are clear from the outset what the placement would involve, empowering them to select an appropriate opportunity to match career aspirations;
- The management of the placement allocation process was streamlined;
- The student has a personalised and bespoke learning agreement as a document that can empower them to have conversations with the industry supervisor if the appropriate learning activities are not being provided to them;
- The learning agreement forms the basis for structuring a mid-placement review between the industry placement supervisor and the student enhancing feedback on performance in a structured manner;
- The learning agreement can structure the conversation with academic tutors who visit the student on the work-placement, assuring that the student is achieving suitable learning while on placement;

- The learning agreement forms the basis for feedback and remedial action if the student is not engaging fully in the placement experience;
- The learning agreement forms the basis for the industry supervisor to assess the student learning at the end of placement;
- The completed and signed learning agreement forms the basis for the University to decide if a student has met the learning outcomes of the industry placement.

Meanwhile using the online blog assessment (outlined in Figure 2), has helped

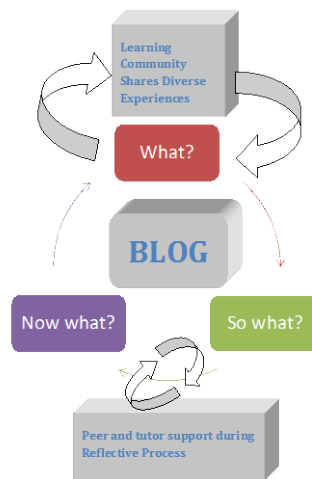


Figure 2. Overview of Blog Assessment

- University staff remain abreast of developments in Industry through engaging in the blog assessment and reading the diverse experiences of the students;
- Students to share experiences and learn from each other;
- Students to be supported while separated from the peers for the first time in their Programme of study;
- Students to actively reflect on their overall development (J. L. Dunne, 2019), linking placement experiences to theory and finding evidence for the development of graduate attributes and allowing them to articulate these and enhance future employability (J. L. Dunne, 2017)

## Conclusions

The success of the curriculum design has been largely because of the judicious use of technology firstly to manage the complex process of placing individual students in an appropriate role within a suitable industry, secondly to quality assure the student learning outcomes for an industry-based learning environment, and thirdly to enhance the assessment and feedback both of core competencies and graduate attributes.

The key learning points are:

1. Technology has improved the management of the work-placement process, from generating ample high-quality and relevant placement opportunities, increasing productivity through better collaboration and communication.
2. Technology has guaranteed the quality of the placement, from defining suitable learning activities, through to the creation of individualised Learning Agreements.
3. The online reflective blog assessments support students' reflection on learning, as well as fostering a community of learning amongst peer groups.

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