The assessment of workplace learning in UK undergraduate History courses

An interim report

Introduction

Context
Although the literature on work-based and workplace learning (wpl) is vast, relatively little has been written about the assessment of such learning. The aim of this History Subject Centre-funded project is to explore how workplace learning is assessed in a discipline not traditionally associated with work placements.

This report summarises the quantitative responses to an online survey that was conducted between 16 September and 30 November 2010. The report and the survey are divided into three sections: (1) organisation and structure; (2) preparation and support; (3) assessment.

The survey sample
A web-based search of all undergraduate History courses in the UK indicated that 38 institutions might offer wpl modules[1]. Emails were sent to every institution listed under 'History on its own as a single subject' on the UCAS website to confirm the web search findings. 25 institutions confirmed that they have wpl modules. 17 departments completed the online survey. In the following tables, the responses have been converted to rounded percentages for ease of comparison.

1. Organisation and structure

WPL Optional or compulsory for all undergraduates in the institution	%
Optional	88
Compulsory	12

WPL Optional or compulsory for all History undergraduates	%
Optional	70
Compulsory	30

Bespoke or off the peg module	%
Bespoke	88
Off the peg	12

Level	%
4 only	6
5 only	41
6 only	35
4, 5	6
5, 6	6
4, 5, 6	6

Minimum and maximum number of weeks[2]	%
Minimum period of study	71
Maximum period of study	53
Neither	30

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[1] Module is used as a generic term to cover all forms of organization and delivery of workplace learning.

[2] As respondents have used different units of measurement, weeks, hours, days per week, further work needs to be done to understand the precise time requirements for wpl modules.

Location of wpl	%
Local town/city	94
Regionally	94
Nationally	71
Internationally	35

Placement finders	%
Student	35
Staff	12
Both	53

Learning contracts	%
Used	65
Not used	35

2. Preparation and support

Preparation	%
Face to face briefing sessions	100
Information in hard copy	88
Online information	77
Other	24
{Meetings with providers	12}
{Lectures, seminars, tutorials	12}

Support during the placement	%
By email	82
By telephone	51
Through tutorials/meetings	47
With staff visits	24
Via the VLE	6
Deploying two or more mechanisms	77

3. Assessment

Assessment methods

The overwhelmingly dominant methods of assessment are learning logs or diaries and reflective essays (see Appendix). 41% of the departments use both methods, with the majority combining logs and essays with other forms of assessment. The distribution of the number of assessment methods is:

Number of methods	% of institutions
1	6
2	29
3	24
4	12
5	18
7	6
8	6

Range of methods used	1-8
Mean number of methods per institution	3.6
Median number of methods per institution	3
Mode	2

Assessors	%
Tutors grade wpl assessments	82
Employers grade	18

Employers assess the students' workplace performance; their grade contributes 10% of the overall mark in *two* institutions and 20% in the third.

Grading scale	%
Percentage	77
Grade point	18
No reply	6

Feedback methods	%
Face-to-face feedback	88
Written commentary on the assignments	82
Written commentary on a standard feedback sheet	71
Written commentary by email	12
Podcasts	6
By telephone of video conference	0
Use two or more methods	88

No other feedback mechanisms have been adopted.

Feedback timing	%
Feedback back within 3 weeks of submission	82
Feedback back within 6 weeks of submission	12
Other – 20 days	6
Feedback back within 1 week of submission	
WPL feedback method/timing differs from other History modules	35

Double marking and internal moderation	%
All assignments are *open* double marked by a second marker	41
Sample double marking, which include all Firsts and Fails and both open and blind marking	35
All assignments are *blind* double marked by a second marker	12
No double marking	12
Internal moderation	53
No internal moderation	47
Double marking process for wpl is different from other History modules	29

Overall, the wpl modules are subject to more extensive double marking than other History assessments.

Contribution to overall degree classification
The complexity of classification algorithms is reflected in the responses to this question. From the initial information, depending on the level of the module, wpl can contribute between 3.75% and 18.7% towards a student's class.

Concluding comment
Our examination so far of the responses gives us confidence that we have a representative sample of practice across History wpl providers and that further analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative data will demonstrate the varied approaches that departments are adopting to wpl.

Appendix

What method(s) is/are used to assess wpl summatively? Tick all that apply

Method	% of departments using the method
Learning logs or diaries	65
Reflective essays	59
Portfolios	24
Projects, individual and group	24
Presentations	24
Case studies	18
Direct observation of performance	18
Orals and interviews	18
Other methods	18 (Take home exam; Assessment prepared by mentor assigned to the student (employee of the institution offering the placement; Provider reference).
Reports (which may be other than in writing, for example audio or video presentations)	18
Computer-based assessments (not limited to multiple-choice questions)	12
Contributions to group or individual blogs, wikis, online forums, bulletin boards	12
Creating learning packages	12
Experimentation in the workplace, in the sense of trying out an innovation and assessing the outcomes	12
Self-assessment exercises	12
Critical incident exercises	6
Systematic observation of workplace practices	6
Audio- and/or video-recording of workplace practices, with analytical commentary	
Multiple choice questions	
Objective Structured Clinical/Practical Examinations (OSC/PEs)	
Patchwork text	
Peer assessment exercises	
Poster sessions	
Problem-solving	
Questionnaires and surveys devised by learners	

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