A New Paradigm for the Online Management of Global Placements Using OPUS

Abstract — **There is a growing awareness that graduates for a global economy need to have a greater emphasis on work-integrated learning (WIL) in out-of-country locations. Such experiences develop the student in many aspects beyond their study specialism. Many leading Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have developed strong international relationships with employers over a long period, but realise that new relationships must be developed continually. Many other HEIs need to develop similar relationships, but need time and resources to achieve similar success.**

However, it is recognised that every HEI has well-developed relationships with many employers in their immediate hinterland, many of which are global operators. Further, from year to year each HEI may have an imbalance of WIL opportunities and students seeking a WIL experience. This paper presents a new paradigm for an agreed online sharing of WIL opportunities among participating HEIs so that their students may apply for and gain a placement overseas. The participating HEIs support the incoming student and undertake identified responsibilities on behalf of the sending HEI. This proposal is a new feature of the open source product, OPUS (Online Placement University System), which has been developed at the University of Ulster to manage all aspects of WIL placements online. The paper presents the concept for placement exchange managed online and early implementation by participating universities from three countries around the world. This new paradigm for the online management of global placements is shown to present students and providers with a global marketplace.

Keywords — **global placements, OPUS software, placement exchange, work-integrated learning**

I. THE NEED

Over the past two years at international and national conferences on work-integrated learning a strong theme has been the ability to develop students to become graduates capable of operating in the

global market. As an example, Pratt (2007) argued for greater use of WIL programmes to develop students' awareness of global issues. The strong support for WIL among many HEIs has driven the quest for placements in overseas locations to widen the professional, cultural and life experiences of the undergraduate. Practitioners such as Taylor and Dobbelstein (2007), Johansson, Eriksson and Johansson (2007) and Laslett and Ward (2008) present examples of well-developed trans-national WIL programmes. Many HEIs have strong contacts with companies worldwide and are, therefore, able to deliver continually overseas placements for their students. However, many other HEIs do not have the same international contacts, or do not have them for a particular subject area, and desire strongly contacts and placements overseas. As many experienced practitioners will explain, development of good international contacts with placements is a resource-intensive and prolonged effort which many faculties/departments within HEIs cannot support adequately. Nevertheless, all HEIs have strong local contacts for WIL support. While the need for globally-aware graduates continues; this proposal based on OPUS offers a new solution for selective sharing of placement opportunities within alliances formed among participating HEIs.

II. THE CONCEPT - DESIGN

This concept of placement exchanges is based on the OPUS open source software programme developed at the University of Ulster since 2001 (University of Ulster, 2009). The features and operation of OPUS are developed by Laird and Turner (2008) and the programme has attracted interest from HEIs in several countries. Within the UK the programme is being implemented by a growing number of universities.

The structural concept for placement exchanges using OPUS is based on any two or more HEIs forming an informal alliance to share selected placement opportunities (within an academic discipline) with each other and to host inbound students who may be offered placements by the provider organisations. Any HEI may participate in several alliances. For example, HEI-A (Sports Studies) has an alliance with HEI-B (Sports Studies) while HEI-B (Engineering) has a different alliance with HEI-C (Engineering). It is expected that no transfer of funds will be necessary due to the mutuality within an alliance. The HEI(Receiving) (i.e. the HEI which 'owns' the placement vacancy and hosts the inbound

student) would undertake responsibilities for support, visits, local assessment (where necessary) and liaison on behalf of the HEI(Sending) (i.e. the HEI which 'owns' the student). Especially when distances are long, this will have the effect of providing effective local and wide-ranging support to the student, at reduced overall cost. The placement requirements of HEI(Sending) will apply to the placement, but may be modified to accommodate local conditions.

III. THE CONCEPT - OPERATIONS

Having established the alliance the process of arranging a placement exchange between two HEIs in this model involves the following activities. These support the fundamental concept in which the placement provider advertises a vacancy, any eligible student applies and the provider selects, thereby providing opportunity and choice for the main parties in the placement.

Using their own criteria, a Placement Coordinator within a HEI identifies pre-placement students who become eligible for placements in the alliance. As organisations offer placement vacancies this Placement Coordinator identifies those which may be suitable for promotion within the alliance and establishes the agreement of the organisation so that all applicants, home and non-home, will be considered for appointment. It is assumed that a potential alliance vacancy could be taken by a non-home student without detriment to the home students, the vacancy cannot be taken by a home student due to non-availability or there are relationship interests to be developed. Both home and non-home exchange-eligible students within the alliance may apply for the vacancy using the online features of OPUS. The organisation and the Placement Coordinators for the applicant and the organisation may view the student's CV and details using their secure login to OPUS. The organisation will use its normal methods to select their candidate and make an offer so that the student's Placement Coordinator may confirm the proposed placement as a final assurance check.

Once placed, the inbound student is added to the dependency of the Placement Coordinator (Receiving) so that a personal academic tutor or mentor may be appointed from the staff of the HEI(Receiving). This role will act as proxy for the student's home HEI and provide the necessary support for the student throughout the placement, at minimal overall cost.

IV. IMPACT OF PLACEMENT EXCHANGE

These placement exchanges engage the discipline-specific Placement Coordinators from two HEIs – one for the student and one for the vacancy as these originate is distant locations (usually). Within the terms of their alliance both HEIs agreed to be mutually supportive without detriment to each other. Now, with an exchange placement confirmed each Placement Coordinator requires online visibility of selected data from both OPUS systems. In addition, the student will have two academic tutors who will require similar access. As OPUS supports extensive reporting and online assessment both academic tutors will require editorial access to the student's assessment programme. Where the work-based supervisor reports on the student he/she will need access to this programme also. In effect, all staff who are involved with the student will require access to two sets of data which rest on two OPUS systems. Any other HEI which is a member of the same alliance will have limited access to some of this data also, notably the organisation and vacancy details, but not the placed student from another HEI.

The basic features of OPUS enabling resource information, communications, announcements and reporting are modified to accommodate the needs of the HEIs in the alliance, recognising that these needs will change during the progress from a student and a vacancy first appearing to the end of an exchange placement.

V. TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This model of placement exchange assumes that participating HEIs will use the OPUS online placement management system. As this is an open source product there is no software cost impact and IT support may be provided from in-house resources or contracted-out. It is essential that data from all participating HEIs will remain secure and that all individual users of the systems have and protect their login credentials. It is planned that a future development will enable non-OPUS placement management systems to join an online alliance with OPUS-using HEIs.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

This model is based on inter-visibility of selected data among participating HEIs within a discipline-specific alliance to share placement opportunities and student support through the use of OPUS. As a result, under-resourced HEIs may source placements overseas and have the assurance of student support from an allied HEI on a mutual basis, thus preparing their undergraduates for the global market. This paradigm for placements exchange enhances the capability of HEIs, especially those in under-developed countries, to access the global WIL market.

VII. REFERENCES

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