

FINDINGS REPORT

1) Project Reference:

14/P/04

Title:

Parliamentary and Political Placements

2) Keywords:

Placements Politics Parliament

Disciplines involved: Politics and Sociology

3) Summary

In 2000 the then Department of Historical and Cultural Studies at the University of Greenwich took an initiative in its delivery of its BA Politics programme. This was inspired by the desire to complement our undergraduate's academic and theoretical study of politics with the opportunity for direct practical activity within the democratic process. It was reinforced by our engagement with the "active citizenship" debate. In addition, we aimed to strengthen Politics degree provision at the University of Greenwich. A further inspiration was to stimulate student enthusiasm by offering the chance to experience the workings of parliament at first hand.

Parliamentary placements were arranged with a number of sympathetic MPs whereby selected third-year students work for one day a week in the office of an MP on a variety of tasks. This work is assessed, counting for 25% of their third year assessment. With the success of this scheme we have expanded such placements to include pressure and interest group activity. In time we hope to include placements in local and regional politics. In this endeavour our geographical position at the centre of London provides obvious advantages in cultivating the necessary contacts.

Our project had three intended outcomes. First, a bank of student extended essays and diaries were to be produced. A second outcome was to raise the profile of the University of Greenwich Politics Division. Thirdly, we intended to build a programme of placements that was distinctive from and complementary to existing programmes in other higher education institutions. Practical operation of the programme has produced additional outcomes. First, student enthusiasm has been stimulated. Secondly, the quality of work produced by students on placement has been raised. This applies to the work they have done not only on placement, but also, in some cases, to that in their other more conventional third year courses. Thirdly, the interplay between the placement students' academic study of politics and their direct experience of political activity has yielded important pedagogical benefits not available from purely lecture theatre/classroom/library work alone. A fourth outcome is the number of specifically designed reading lists, essay questions and briefing notes that have been produced with which we have assessed and advised our students on placement. A final outcome has been to stimulate the interest of the teaching staff

involved in managing the project. Our subject knowledge has been both tested and expanded by the rigours of the placement project.

4) Activities

The Parliamentary and Political Placements Programme at Greenwich University.

This programme takes place when students are in their third year of study. It is based upon the “day-release” model and involves students working for one day a week in the office of an MP or pressure or interest group. They do this instead of one of their other conventional third year courses and their placement therefore counts for 25% of their assessment at Level Three.

There were many reasons why this model of placements was chosen. The day-release model incurs much less disruption to students than block release programmes. The Greenwich Politics Division is small and has limited resources. This means there is no prospect of creating a degree programme which includes a year-long or term/semester-long placement along the lines of provision at the University of Hull. Greenwich students are, in the main, from non-traditional backgrounds. For them to be required to complete an extra placement year as part of their degree would be financially impossible. The implications of this for equal opportunities are obvious. Similarly, the idea of a term/semester-long placement is impossible for us at Greenwich. Students would be unable to attend their other third year courses if they were away from the university for half the year on placement. The day release model has many benefits, therefore. Students are already resident in London so no extensive extra living and travel expense is incurred. There is also less of the personal disruption to the students’ personal/family life inevitable in four-year schemes directed from higher education institutions based outside London. The day release model such as this contributes to widening participation.

The programme operates on the basis of mutual benefit. On the one hand, the placement provider can count on the assistance of a committed and motivated person to help in the operation of a busy office free of charge. On the other hand, the student gains an exciting opportunity to work in a real practical political setting. Students placed with an MP can expect to be engaged in a number of different tasks. These may include: prioritise and answer letters; write letters to ministers; research and write briefings; prepare parliamentary questions; research and write articles and speeches; process asylum claims; and work on specific projects on a wide variety of subjects. In some cases, where the political sympathy of the placement student reflects that of the MP, duties can include appeals for funds and canvassing. Students placed with a pressure or interest group can expect to be involved in background research tasks; case work; project work (often on projects specifically set up for them); attending meetings/ evening receptions; and shadowing a field officer.

The student is engaged in independent learning activity at a distance, but is supervised by the placement co-ordinator in a series of briefing sessions held at our campus in Greenwich. Students liaise with the placement co-ordinator through frequent telephone conversations, email and face-to-face meetings. The co-ordinator normally

visits each participant's office twice on placement to see the placement provider and the student.

Assessment is in three parts. The first is a reflective diary of 3,000 words which counts for 30% of overall assessment. Secondly, the placement provider completes a report on the performance of the student. This is worth 20% of the final assessment. The remaining 50% consists of a 5,000 word extended essay written by the student on a question relevant to their placement. In the case of a student placed with an MP an example of a question is:

“Does Parliament matter? Does the Backbencher matter?”

As the programme has expanded to include more MPs and pressure groups, a greater range of assessment questions was developed. Some examples of these questions can be found below in section 7.

To answer questions of this type, the student has to make use of both their direct experience of parliament recorded in their reflective diaries and the standard published academic and informed literature.

Initial Planning and Preparation.

The initiative for the University of Greenwich political placements programme came from both within the university and outside. Dr Alan Foster, Reader in Politics, had been aware of the role of placements in other departments at Greenwich. International Marketing, the Business School and teacher training courses all featured placements as part of their structure. Dr Foster was also aware of the role of placements in the teaching of politics at American institutions. Convinced of the benefits of practical experience to students, Dr Foster responded enthusiastically to an approach made to him from a former student who had greatly enjoyed his time at the University of Greenwich.

The approach came in 2000 from Ze'ev Portner, the Senior Research and Parliamentary Assistant to Louise Ellman, MP for Liverpool Riverside. Ze'ev Portner offered places for two third year students to begin work in his office immediately. Dr Foster approached Dr Jane Longmore, the Head of the Humanities School with this idea. The need for immediate action meant circumventing university bureaucracy. Placements were not at that time present in the scheme of politics assessment. To make the changes necessary to implement a placement programme using the normal university procedures would have taken up to six months, too long a period to countenance before students went on placement. The proposal was therefore, to go ahead and place two students and approve the move retrospectively. In this, and all other matters relating to politics placements, Dr Longmore was very supportive and encouraging. University regulations proved flexible enough to allow action to be taken immediately and approval to be granted later. Two placements at the parliamentary office of Louise Ellman MP were set up immediately.

So that the placement programme could be expanded, Ze'ev Portner agreed to keep an eye open for other placement opportunities, as did the two students selected to work

with him. From these small beginnings the Greenwich programme has expanded from two students in 2000-01 to 10 students in 2004-05.

At an early stage in initial planning there was a desire to achieve balance in all matters relating to placements. With the first MP aboard being a Labour MP there was a hope that MPs representing the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Parties could be brought into the programme. Whereas Liberal Democrat MPs have become involved, we have had less success in gaining the participation of a Conservative MP. Only this year have we made a first modest step with a Conservative MP. We earnestly hope that these links, and those currently being explored with pressure and interest groups, can be built upon in the coming years.

The initial planning and preparation of the Greenwich programme was based on the experience and observation of Dr Alan Foster. His sense of the way in which the teaching of politics was developing, with initiatives like that introduced by Lord Norton at Hull, provided the academic impetus for this programme. As such, there was no literature consulted during the planning of this activity. As the Greenwich programme has grown, the Greenwich team has found it rewarding to learn more about the important developments elsewhere in this field at the University of Hull, University of Leeds, University of Huddersfield and Roehampton University. The presence and involvement of C-SAP in this is much appreciated too.

From the very beginning of this programme, we have encouraged students to develop their own placements with either their local MP or a pressure/interest group they may be connected with. Approaches of this kind have enabled us to place students in the offices of two serving cabinet ministers and two pressure groups.

Implementation

In our first four years we simply picked students we considered suitable for placements and offered them to our placement provider. Since the programme has expanded, we have had to formalise the application/selection process we now maintain.

The qualities we look for in a placement student are set out in two separate documents. First, there is an application form we send to each student who expresses an interest in taking a placement. Our original application form asked students to write a 3-400 word statement in answer to the question “Why do I deserve to be given a place on the political placements programme?” Although the form included general guidelines to assist the student, we felt it did not ensure that students gave important practical details in their application. The new form asks students several straightforward questions which combine to create a database of those students on placement. Apart from asking for obvious information such as contact details, the form requires students to write about their practical skills (IT, team-working skills, and personal diplomacy) and work experience, either paid or voluntary. We do not ask about students’ political opinions; however we do like to know about any political involvement or activity. This is designed to avoid a situation where a placement provider is given a student who has radically opposite views. Finally, the form asks about which days of the week a student is available to go on placement. This is

important, not only to avoid clashes with students' other level three courses but because our students often work during their study.

The second document is the guidelines we send to placement providers to assist them in the completion of their reports on the students' performance. Briefly put we look for students who have good attendance and are punctual. Additionally we look for command of office skills, research skills, teamwork and personal diplomatic skills, ability to work on own initiative, good communication skills (telephone, email) and discretion in dealing with matters of a sensitive and confidential nature. A slightly amended version of this form is circulated to placement students to act as a job description.

As our programme has expanded, we have become aware that providers differ in the way in which they prefer to accept students. Some are willing to accept whichever students we supply for them. Others much prefer to go through an application/selection process. This involves the provider choosing from a shortlist of three placement applicants each of whom will have sent in curriculum vitae and supporting letter. Although it has not happened yet, it seems possible that providers will move towards a formal interview as part of this process.

Underlying all of this is an important consideration. We seek to place students who will benefit from the placement experience. We also seek to place students who will do credit to the University of Greenwich. This is important to ensure, as far as is possible, that existing good relations with placement providers are not undermined by a bad placement experience.

In the first year of the programme, Dr Foster made the final selection of which students will be offered a placement based on his knowledge of the students and in consultation with other politics staff. Now that John McLean has taken over the programme this has remained the preferred system.

The involvement of the wider politics staff has also remained an integral part of the programme. Not only do they assist in the selection process, they help in the growing burden of marking completed student extended essays and diaries. In the case of Professor Mick Ryan, his connection with INQUEST has provided the impetus for the creation of a new placement to come on stream in 2005.

Including the current year, we have sent 26 students on placement. Of these 16 are male, ten female. Three were access students, four mature, two from overseas, four are British Asian and two black. They have been placed in parliamentary offices at Westminster, constituency offices and the headquarters of pressure groups. They are supported by briefing sessions held at the University of Greenwich Maritime campus where the Politics division is located.

5) Outcomes

The development of the Greenwich politics placement programme has benefited greatly from the award of £7,500 from C-SAP in July 2004. This allowed John McLean, the placements co-ordinator, relief from teaching and funding for the cost of

travel. He has been able to arrange new placements and work on formalising the delivery of the existing programme.

There have been several pleasing outcomes from our placement initiative. Student projects are available to be consulted in Room W124, King William Court, Greenwich Maritime Campus. Our programme has added to the variety of placements available in the politics field. Alongside existing year-long and term/semester-long programmes elsewhere, our day release model is distinctive and complementary. Student applicants mention the placements as a reason for applying to read politics at Greenwich. Our raised profile has manifested itself in other ways. We have had approaches from MPs and pressure groups that have heard about our programme and wish to be involved. That the Greenwich programme is now well established has no doubt been beneficial in attracting this attention. Perhaps most interestingly, the programme has had the effect of expanding the experience and expertise of the politics staff directly involved. An example of this comes from 2002 when a student came to us having arranged her own placement with her local MP. This MP, it turned out, was also a junior cabinet minister. Our assumption had been that any placement would be with a backbench MP and not with a member of the executive. This created a challenge to formulate a new assessment question to embrace the activities of a frontbencher. It was obvious that any student placement would be concerned more with the MPs constituency duties than any ministerial responsibilities. What was less clear to us at the time was how the MP dealt with the implications concerning separation of powers. We had to do not a little research to find out how this problem is overcome. Our initial understanding, that constituency casework in a ministers seat was handed over to a neighbouring MP from the same party, was incorrect. Much to our surprise we discovered that the minister in question tackled his own constituency work with the implications for separation of powers left in abeyance.

There have been important pedagogical benefits from our programme not available from purely classroom/library based work. Students on placement carry out real active field research not normally a major part of the learning experience at undergraduate level. They are able to test a stated hypothesis by making use of a wealth of resources as well as their own experiences, observations and interviews. Information gained in this way can then be compared and contrasted with theoretical academic work.

In implementing this programme we have produced a number of materials used in the delivery of political placements. These consist of reading lists, essay questions, briefing notes, application forms, and guidelines for placement providers to assist them in the completion of their reports on students. Beyond this, the Politics programme has had the outcome of reinforcing the decision of the History division to launch a placement programme of their own. They have initiated contacts with museums, archives and record offices.

Observation of student performance suggests that there has been an improvement in student work across the range of their third year courses. Reasons for this are not as yet entirely clear. It may have something to do with the students' confidence being raised because of their success in achieving placements. Another explanation could be inspiration given to a student from access gained to resources such as the House of Commons Library. It could, of course, be due to the natural improvement many students make as they become more experienced in dealing with the rigours of

academic study. Employment prospects for placement students have also been improved. Former Greenwich Politics Placement students have found employment in a number of “political” posts ranging from parliament itself to the Fabian Society, Electoral Commission and in the field of public relations.

Students are able to give feedback on an existing general purpose evaluation form. This form asks students to list which three things they liked most about a course and which three things they liked least. There is also space for students to write down any things about the programme they would like to see changed in the future and any suggestions they would like to make. Although happy with this form, we are considering designing a course specific evaluation form tailored to the placement programme.

In giving feedback, students are always appreciative of the opportunity to experience practical political activity that the placement programme gives them. They also mention the potential benefit they have gained in terms of future employment. Students have expressed disappointment at the mundane nature of some of their work, though coping with this is an integral part of the placement learning experience. Student feedback has also highlighted problems with our placement programme that we have to manage as best we can. Two examples illustrate this. First, some providers may want a student to work on a project for two or three consecutive days. Additionally, problems could arise suddenly and unexpectedly which may require the attention of a placement student for more than one day. Our programme, which fits a placement into the third year of a students’ degree, could not adapt to this. Any student attending a placement for three days in-a-row would miss classes in other courses with resultant detrimental impact on learning. A second example involves the problem of gaining Westminster passes. Never wholly straight forward for placement students, it has become a lengthier process in these days of heightened security. Student feedback has informed us that there has been an occasion where one of our students had to share a pass for a time with another intern (from a different institution). Without a pass, placement students have to be escorted everywhere within the Palace of Westminster which causes unnecessary complications for provider and student alike.

As co-ordinator of the programme, John McLean reports to several groups and individuals. First, he reports to Jane Longmore, Head of the Humanities School. Secondly, he reports to the Department of History Politics and Philosophy which includes Politics teaching staff and staff in the History division. Additionally, there are ongoing discussions with Sociology staff. We are awaiting proposals for cooperation from our colleagues in Sociology relating to student placements with the Refugee Council. Our main contact in Sociology is Professor Thomas Acton, a leading national authority on Romany issues with many publications to his name. Collaboration with Sociology has been furthered by a successful bid for internal funding. We will receive £5,000 to jointly develop placement study packs.

Outside the university, we have shared our knowledge with other institutions at the C-SAP conference in 2004 and as a participant in the C-SAP Pedagogy of Placements Project which is ongoing. We will be presenting a paper to the 2005 C-SAP conference.

In developing our programme we have had to make some adjustments to our wider politics provision to embed placements. When our programme began in 2000, Politics provision in the area of British governance was represented by courses in the first year and the third year. The first year course was British Political Process and explored the workings of the British system of governance. The third year course was British Political Parties and involved study of the ideologies and conduct of the Conservative, Labour and Liberal/SDP/Lib Dem parties. This meant that students selected for placement did not study British parliamentary politics in the year before they went to work in parliament. This fault has since been remedied. The third year course has been moved to the second year so that students chosen to work in parliament can gain valuable background knowledge of parliament before their placement. Placements will be an integral part of a new Citizenship programme currently being validated at Greenwich.

Initially, due to the need to act quickly in the early stages of the programme, placements were provisionally classified under dissertations in terms of assessment. Students worked to the dissertation course specification and deadline. Now, placements have their own slot in the politics programme. The placement programme has its own course specification and its own assessment, both distinct from dissertation provision. At the outset of the programme students could not do both a placement and a dissertation. This still applies today.

6) Implications

Various practical difficulties have arisen in the administration and management of the programme. Since assuming the role of Politics Placement Co-ordinator, a major difficulty for John McLean has been competing calls on his time. In August 2004 he was made Programme Leader of the Foundation Year for Combined Studies. Induction of students to this programme dominates the period from late September to early October. This is also a crucial time for the establishment of placements. Essential placement work, such as initial meetings between students and providers had to be postponed as a result of commitment to the foundation year. One solution to this is to free John McLean from his foundation year duties. Another is to commence work on establishing placements in early September before foundation year induction. The difficulty with this is that staff, students and providers may be unavailable due to either holidays or, in the case of MPs, the parliamentary recess.

A change in the university calendar has also focussed attention on the possible need to bring forward the commencement of placements. End of year examination and assessment now begins in late April instead of mid-May. Given that we prefer to end a student placement about three weeks before finals to allow adequate revision, the earlier start examinations is regrettable.

Placement providers in the political field are most likely to require the services of a student on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. This is especially the case for MPs, as it is mid-week when parliament is busiest. We feel that it would benefit our programme if level three politics courses could be timetabled on Monday and Friday where possible. This would avoid clashes between politics courses and potential placement days and increase the availability of our students. We have yet to suggest

such a timetabling change and have no knowledge of whether such an alteration would be possible.

As the number involved increases, getting all the students together in the same place at the same time for briefings and advice sessions has become problematic. Other classes, their placement commitments, paid work to support their studies and home or personal commitments all serve to reduce the number of opportunities to get all the placement students together. This means that essay advice sessions have to be repeated to ensure all students gain the full support from academic staff.

Visiting students on placement has also proved a logistical problem. The placement Co-ordinator, John McLean, is kept fully stretched by his commitments in teaching and in his other role as programme leader of the School of Humanities foundation year. These constraints, coupled with the necessity to arrange visits at the convenience of the placement provider, have lessened the number of available dates to conduct visits. When they have been able to take place, visits have proved to have great benefits. They have served to reassure students about what is required of them on placement. Visits can reveal problems at an early stage. Perhaps most helpful, however, is the development of personal contacts between teaching staff and providers. It is far better in terms of the smooth operation of placements if providers and teaching staff are able to conduct business in face-to-face meetings rather than via email correspondence alone. The placement co-ordinator received generous funding from C-SAP to help in the monitoring of the programme. Without this support the burdens involved would have been very much greater.

Our programme has benefited from the creation by some of our students of their own placements. In this they have either exploited existing links with an MP or pressure group, or have offered their services to their local MP. Of a total of 26 students so far placed by our programme since 2000, seven have taken this route. There are, however, certain issues to bear in mind when students seek to organise their own placement. Students can overestimate their ability to create a placement. They can be convinced that a placement is within their grasp and then be disappointed. As a result of the time invested in ultimately fruitless efforts they can also miss out on one of the placements granted by the university. We now ensure that all students interested in placements fill out an application form, even those confident of securing their own. We will also introduce a cut off point whereby suitable students who have sought their own placement but not yet finalised it will be offered one of the university's placements.

In the direction of the programme in the last few years one problem in particular has arisen which required our attention. This is when a placement has proved an unhappy experience for both student and provider because the student has been unable to integrate for whatever reason. In such circumstances we have to salvage the situation by transferring the student to a taught course or to an orthodox dissertation. On three occasions so far we have had to switch a student from placement to another course. In two cases we have been able to move the student into a conventional dissertation without excessive disruption to the student because the student had chosen the dissertation option. A third example proved more problematic because the student concerned had not picked the dissertation option in the third year. We will return to this case below. This highlights the vital importance of the system used to select students for placement. Because the number of placements available in any given year

is uncertain, we cannot guarantee placements for all students who both express an interest and satisfy our criteria. We therefore insist that students chose a full range of third year course options in the event of there being no placement available for them. When allocated a placement the successful student gives up one of these third year courses, or their dissertation should that have been their choice. In the great majority of cases the fit between student and placement has been happy. The selection process can never be purely scientific. There is always a risk that a student may prove incompatible with their placement. It is impossible to predict with absolute accuracy whether a student will run into difficulty. To illustrate this it can be said that we have placed students who have been able to balance family and work commitments with their studies without problems. Conversely, we have had one student without extra responsibilities of a family or workplace character who did experience difficulties with his placement and had to be switched (successfully) to a conventional dissertation.

Problems of this sort have convinced us of the need to continue to monitor students in the early days and weeks of their placement. This allows us to act quickly and move the student to another course if necessary. University regulations allow third year students to change their options up to three weeks into term. A slightly more relaxed approach to this is taken on placements, though we do have an idea to formalise this process. If a student has chosen a dissertation in their third year and gives that up to do a placement, it is easy to move them back to their dissertation. The student will normally have done some work on their dissertation over the previous summer vacation. It is not impossible to pick this up again if needed. A greater problem arises when a student has chosen four conventional courses in their third year. As highlighted in the previous paragraph we had an example of this in 2004-05. The decision was taken for the student to complete a dissertation length answer to the same question he would have addressed in a placement extended essay. Being unable to produce a diary for assessment and having made it impossible for the provider to assess his performance in a report, this seemed the fairest answer. It helped the student by allowing him to use work done during the portion of the placement completed. It avoided the student having to begin a “new” dissertation or attempt to catch up on the content and assessment of a level three course.

To avoid a situation where a student, having given up a placement, has to pick up the pieces in one of their courses, we are planning to suggest that placement students “sit in” on all four of their third year courses for the first five or six weeks of term. This will allow the student, the placement provider and Greenwich staff to be convinced that the placement is working effectively. Because problems are more likely to arise in the earliest stages of a placement, any student experiencing them can be moved back to their fourth course without having to catch up. Coursework tends not to be set in the first five or six weeks of a course, therefore a placement student would not incur extra burdens during the “sitting in” period.

7) Resources

Named contacts.

Members of Parliament.

John Austin MP
Hilary Benn MP
Helen Clark MP
Louise Ellman MP
Michael Fallon MP
Sandra Gidley MP
Matthew Green MP
Howard Stoate MP
Stephen Timms MP

Pressure/Interest Groups.

The Campaign for an English Parliament
The Commonwealth Secretariat
INQUEST
RSPCA

Examples of Assessment Questions.

For a student placed in the Westminster office of an MP:

The role of Parliament in theory and practice.
The role of the backbencher in theory and practice.

For a student placed in the Westminster office of a cabinet minister:

How does the “fusion of powers” of the three branches (the Judiciary, Executive and Legislative) in the British political system affect the workings of Cabinet Ministers and the relationship with their constituency?

For a student placed in the constituency office of a backbench MP:

What is the role of an MP as a constituency representative in theory? What do the activities of a MP's constituency office tell us about this role in practice?

For a student placed in the Westminster office of an opposition MP:

The role of shadow politics at Westminster.
The case of third party shadow politics at Westminster.

For a student placed with an interest/pressure group:

What is the role of the Commonwealth Secretariat in international affairs? What is the impact of the Commonwealth Secretariat Political Affairs Division on the Caribbean/Pacific region?

Briefing Notes:

The Separation of Powers
Members of Parliament and their Constituency

Published material:

Strengthening Parliament: The report of the Commission to Strengthen Parliament, July 2000. (The Norton Report)

8) References

None

9) Contact Details

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