

## Making the Most of Masters: Supporting work-based transitions at three institutions

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**ABSTRACT:** A key transition for Masters students is translating learning from their Programme to vocational settings. Making the Most of Masters (MMM) supports transitioning into the workplace for Masters students by embedding Work Based Projects (WBPs) in the Taught Postgraduate Curriculum. A partnership between the Universities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Stirling the award winning project (Times Higher Education Award 2013) was funded by the Scottish Funding Council under the Learning to Work 2 initiative (LTW2). A collaborative but non-prescriptive approach has allowed each HEI partner to develop support tailored to their students and Programmes. This paper reviews the different approaches to supporting student transitions surrounding WBPs.

### 1 Introduction

A key transition for Masters students is translating learning from their Programme to vocational settings. Making the Most of Masters (MMM) supports this transition for Masters students by embedding Work Based Projects (WBPs) in the Taught Postgraduate Curriculum. Work based projects for the purpose of the MMM project are an alternative to the usual University based dissertation project and involve students undertaking a host organisation's project as their Masters dissertation project.

As a partnership between the Universities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Stirling, the award winning project (Times Higher Education Award 2013) developed and trialed a range of materials and approaches to supporting students in their transition into WBPs and the journey beyond. Many of these resources now form part of the 'WBP toolkit' which, through a collaborative but non-prescriptive approach, has allowed each HEI partner to develop support tailored to their students and Programmes. This paper will outline the approach

taken in each of the partner institutions before highlighting some emerging key themes. Through the MMM project a process was developed which identifies and supports key stages with respect to student transitions:

- Engagement
- Linking to projects and organisations
- Project preparation
- On-going support
- Reflection and moving-on

To support these key stages a variety of resources were developed, including the MMM website ([www.mastersprojects.ac.uk](http://www.mastersprojects.ac.uk)), used as a platform to share learning and to promote WBPs as dissertations, promotional materials for engaging all stakeholders, workshops and online resources for students. The collected knowledge from the three partner institutions was collated into the 'WBP toolkit', a resource consisting of guidance and adaptable materials that could support embedding of WBPs within the curriculum. Utilising these materials each of the MMM Project Coordinators (PCs) was then able to tailor their approach with respect to induction sessions, events, workshops and local Virtual Learning Environments. These approaches are outlined below by each partner institution.

## **2 MMM at Aberdeen**

### **2.1 Background**

At Aberdeen MMM is located within the Careers Service, providing central support at all stages of the WBP process. Central provision is designed to ensure a worthwhile experience for Programmes, host organisations and students. Working with Programme leaders to identify the support needs of students at Programme level, a tailored series of workshops and online material is delivered jointly by Careers Advisers and MMM over the academic year. Key transitions being into Masters study, career planning and management skills and preparation for WBPs.

During the first full academic year of operation the focus of the Project Coordinator was to engage Programmes in the MMM project and to source relevant projects from external organisations. While open to all Programmes across the institution, initial interest predominantly came from Energy related Programmes (Engineering, Geosciences and Economics). Interest in WBPs has grown and they are now an integral part of Programmes across all three Colleges (Life Sciences and Medicine, Arts and Social Sciences and Physical Sciences) and have evolved to include different models of delivering WBPs to students.

### **2.2 Supporting Student Transitions**

As MMM became established at the University of Aberdeen, the student support aspect developed in a number of ways, with resources available at a 'global' level and Programme specific input.

Toolkit resources such as the Project Agreement have been adapted to suit the governance structure at Aberdeen, with Programmes further encouraged to adapt to suit particular circumstances. A range of Aberdeen specific student case studies were produced which are

promoted to students along with provision of print material such as the 'Introduction to WBP's' leaflet. In addition the MMM PC provides a central point of contact for any student who would like to arrange their own WBP.

On most taught postgraduate Programmes a Careers Adviser will provide a Career Management Skills workshop, supporting students in identifying career options and making applications. On some Programmes the MMM Project Coordinator provided additional input to these workshops while on others additional stand along workshops were provided.

Two 'core' workshops, designed to be tailored for each Programme have been developed and are delivered by the MMM Coordinator at Programme level;

**'Your Masters, Your Opportunity'**, delivered at the beginning of the academic year and designed to help students establish what they wish to achieve from their Masters (thus supporting the transition into the Masters) and to engage them in developing their employability in general. The WBP is introduced as one option by which they can achieve this.

**'Work-based Projects for [Programme]'** provides a more in-depth introduction to WBP's, including exploration of the benefits and challenges for all stakeholders (students, organisations and the University), how to find a WBP and effective networking.

Students on most Programmes offering WBPs will have access to at least one of these workshops. While they are usually optional and not scheduled into the teaching timetable typically attendance is high.

Students on the MSc Geographical Information Systems Programme have also taken part in a 'Workplace Professionalism' workshop, delivered at the request of the Programme leader. This workshop supported students in understanding typical workplace practices, behaviours and expectations in the UK.

Feedback from students indicated that they found the sessions useful in helping to establish what they want to achieve from their Programme of study, in understanding WBP's and had provided motivation in sourcing their own WBP.

### **2.3 Designing student support into the curriculum**

On the MSc Global Health and Management Programme students have the option to complete an externally supervised WBP as a 30 credit course during the second semester of teaching. As a pre-requisite to this students must complete a non-credit bearing 'Global Health Careers' course. The MMM Project Coordinator supported the development of this course and leads 3 workshops: 'Your Masters, Your Opportunity', 'Professionalism in the Workplace' and 'Marketing Yourself'. 'Professionalism in the Workplace' introduces typical workplace culture in the UK, explores what professionalism is and encourages students to consider how they can use their own professional networks effectively and the potential benefits these may provide. 'Marketing Yourself' focuses on CV writing and online presence. It is taught as a hands on practical, with an introduction to CV's and online networking sites. Students then use the remaining time to work on their own CV and develop their online profile (usually on LinkedIn) supported by the MMM Project Coordinator.

Following review of the course and requests from students two additional sessions were included; 'Learning styles and Team Role Preferences' allowing students to explore their own personal learning styles and team roles preferences (Belbin inventory); and 'Personality

preferences, motivations and values and Global Health careers' exploring personal motivations through use of the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory (MBTI) and careers options following their studies. These sessions were delivered by a Careers Adviser.

All taught postgraduate students in the Institute of Applied Health Sciences are enrolled on a 'Generic Skills' course which includes the 'Your Masters, Your Opportunity' workshop. The course also includes material developed by the MMM Careers Education Developer on 'Joining the workplace' and 'Professionalism', delivered via the University's Virtual Learning Environment.

A 'Professionalism and Making the Most of the WBP' workshop is delivered to students on the MSc Museum Studies Programme ahead of their WBP (which is a 20 day placement upon which they then write a dissertation). The workshop focuses on approaching the workplace in a professional manner and ways in which they can maximise the opportunity. Students are encouraged to record and reflect upon their experience using MMM materials to support and enhance their learning from the placement experience.

More recently resources developed have been adapted for use with undergraduate students. In particular a workshop originally developed to aid students' review and reflection on their project experience has been delivered to returning year abroad students and those on a Level 3 employability course where they undertook a group project supervised by an external organisation over the semester.

### **3 MMM at Edinburgh**

#### **3.1 Background**

Support for Edinburgh Masters students transitioning into and through WBPs is provided centrally from The Institute for Academic Development (IAD), but delivered at Programme or School level. This involves MMM working with embedded staff to provide tailored in-house workshops and events that are hosted and presented by the School or Programme. Contextualisation by the academic units and staff allows the students to see validation by their Programme/School for WBPs, but also allows students to gain tailored support. This 'best fit' approach as opposed to a prescriptive 'one size fits all' allows sessions to have contextualised content, timings that fit within modules and validation by Programmes. This ultimately resulted in a diverse portfolio of WBP transition support where ownership is taken over by the Programme or School.

At Edinburgh the MMM project has run for more than three years. MMM support was opened up to all Schools and Programmes across the university. This open and non-restrictive approach allowed a wide range of disciplines the opportunity to engage with MMM; with the variety of disciplines interacting ranging from STEM subjects, through the social sciences, to the humanities and arts. The wide diversity in disciplines and thus large range of individual Programmes that engaged allowed the landscape of WBP and WBL at Masters level to be mapped at Edinburgh. From this it was clear that there was mixture of processes for WBPs and a variety of Programme structures that WBPs could fit into. From this three main types of WBP systems can be seen; the student led, Programme level and School coordinated (Fig. 1). Each system can offer different experiences and benefits to the students.

Figure 1: Types of WBP Processes at Edinburgh

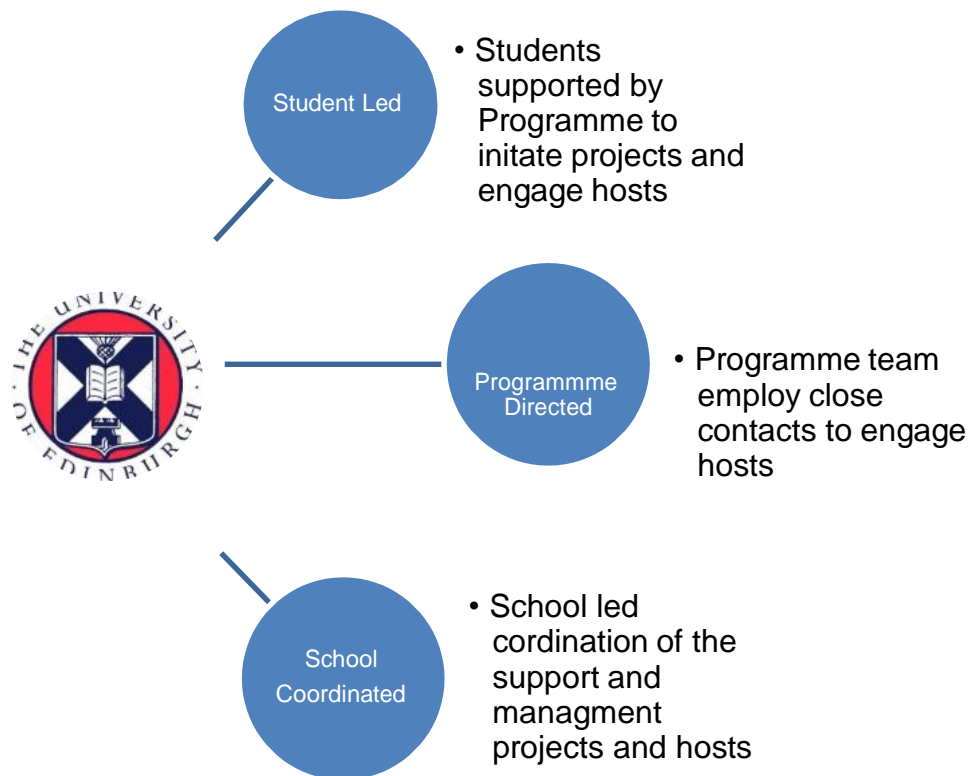


Figure 1: Highlighting the three main types of WBP processes found across the university

### 3.2 MMM Supporting Student Transitions at University of Edinburgh

Reflecting on the diversity of WBP processes at Edinburgh it became clear that a non-prescriptive model that would allow contextualisation of the support for each Programme would be the best way forward. Though there are a variety of structures for WBP there are key time points for implementing WBP support in a Masters Programme (Fig. 2) that could be seen across the majority of Programmes. To accommodate the diversity in individual Programme processes combined with support at the key WBP transitions, the central support provided by MMM is flexible and adaptable and importantly offered at the appropriate time points in a Masters year (Fig.2). To support for these key WBP transitions throughout the Masters year several approaches are used, such as internal networks, awareness raising, in-house contextualised workshops and provision of adaptable resources.

Figure 2: Key Support Areas

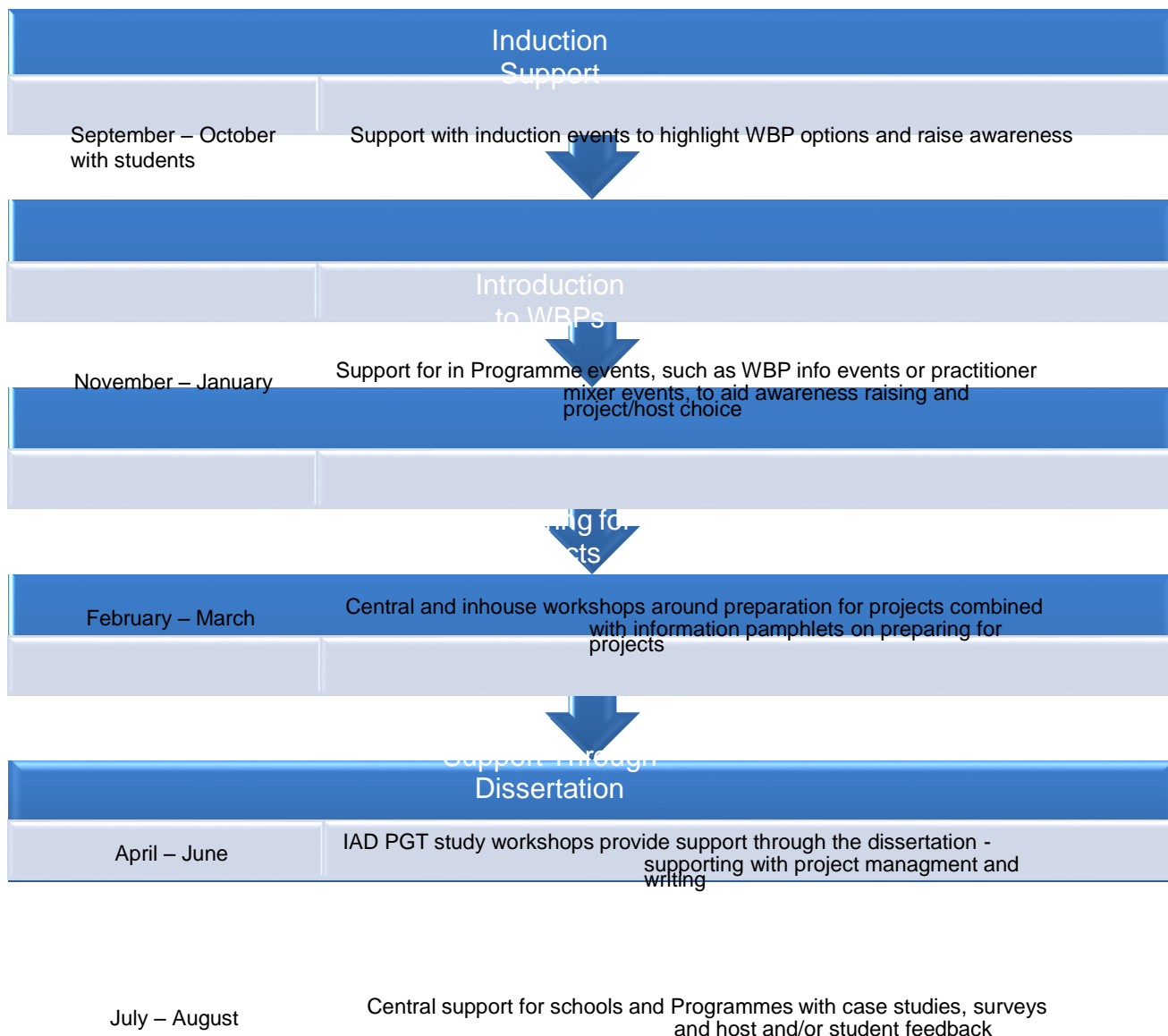


Figure 2: Highlighting the key areas of support and how Edinburgh MMM looks to support students and staff. In addition to the support for each area, there is a quarterly MMM newsletter and twice yearly events for staff to help share best practice and information on support at key times.

**Internal Network:** The internal network consists of staff involved with WBPs, this includes, The Careers Service, Heads of Schools, Programme Directors, WBP coordinators and academic supervisors. The network is centrally managed by the MMM PC and supports staff with setting up WBPs or developing current WBP process in their Schools or Programmes. This is done in part by acting as a conduit to knowledge or resources, provided by a central newsletter that is sent to the network at key time points in the WBP year. The newsletter combines information for students on workshops and events along with information and events for staff. Additionally the MMM PC facilitates, via the internal MMM network, sharing of best practices between Schools and Programmes, awareness raising across staff and students, available tools and resources (MMM toolkit), and facilitation/guidance/support when setting up new events for staff. These events along with the hub activities of MMM

allow a community of practice to be developed.

**Student Workshops and Events:** Students are supported to transition into and through their WBP by workshops and events. This includes a mixture of central WBP workshops and tailored in-house events. For in-house WBP events such as workshops, networking nights or exhibitions, MMM works with embedded staff to provide tailored in-house workshops and events that are hosted and presented by the School or Programme. Examples of this are introduction to WBPs sessions and practitioner mixer events. MMM provide design and administration help to set up these sessions, but works with the faculty in order to hand over ownership to the Schools or Programmes.

In addition to the in-house events, central workshops around WBP support and dissertations are provided by MMM and also the IAD Masters Programme. This allows students to mix with a wide variety students from different discipline backgrounds and also raise the feeling of WBP community throughout the student body. These workshops include, preparing for the workplace, making the most of your WBP, project management and dissertation writing.

**Resources:** The culmination of the three MMM partner universities exploration of WBPs was in the production of the WBP toolkit. The toolkit contains guidance on running WBPs (from staff, student and host perspectives) along with template documents, such as MoUs, IP and advertising materials. The toolkit is a key element to the provision of non-prescriptive support at Edinburgh. It is a tool that can support key WBP areas while not imposing the minutiae of implementation, allowing ownership of the process to become embedded with in Schools and Programmes, thus giving best fit WBP transition support for the students across the university.

### **3.3 Summary of WBP Transition Support at Edinburgh**

The initial MMM project allowed learning to be gained around the modes of WBP implementation at Edinburgh along with the key time points/areas for support. Due to the size of Edinburgh University and the autonomy of Programmes and Schools combined with the great diversity of Programmes, has meant that the implementation of support has followed a non-prescriptive methodology. This allowed a “pick and choose” culture that enabled contextualisation and ownership of the support for student WBP transitions to be embedded at School and Programme level.

## **4 MMM at Stirling**

### **4.1 Background**

Initial low MMM project uptake at The University of Stirling provided strong evidence that there was a real need to support students in their transition into WBPs for their Masters dissertation. Informal feedback suggested that the lack of student engagement was a key issue with a poor understanding of MMM and WBPs combined with concerns over quality of projects, their supervision and workload being important components. The departure of the original MMM PC, in the second year of MMM support, presented an opportunity to alter the governance of the project to improve both student and academic engagement. Thus, the post was physically re-located from the Career Development Centre (CDC) to the School of Natural Sciences (SNS). This different model has created a much more dynamic relationship between academic staff and the PC so that they work synergistically to enhance the student transition into WBPs.

## **4.1 MMM Supporting Student Transitions at University of Stirling**

### **4.1.1 Engaging Students: The Initial Employer Engagement Event**

At this time and in order to enhance student engagement the decision was taken to hold an Employer Engagement Event in the first semester. This aimed to provide more information about MMM and WBPs while also offering students opportunities to network with potential employers and project hosts. It acted a focal point for students to consider WBPs as an alternative to academic based Masters projects and encouraged them to consider their skills, attributes and future career plans.

Although primarily aimed at SNS, this event also welcomed staff and students from the Schools of Management and Arts & Humanities. In its first year 26 employer organisations attended the event. It was held very soon after the new PC was appointed and consequently preparation time was limited with little face-to-face time with students. Before the evening, students were provided with a written "Student Preparation Guide" along with a booklet containing information about the companies attending.

The event commenced with a series of short oral presentations: two students from the previous year spoke about their experiences of undertaking a WBP; the PC introduced MMM and how it operated; while the University's Enterprise Officer provided some hints and tips on networking before students circulated around the various host organisation stands. Students also had an opportunity to visit a "Careers Room" which provided morale support and a CV clinic. At the end of the event students were asked to complete a minimum of three "Contact Cards" which provided their contact details and summarised topics discussed with particular external organisations which were duly returned to the businesses of interest. These in turn elicited project proposals from employers, on a pro-forma adapted from the Toolkit.

Evaluation showed that the event was extremely well received by all stakeholders and in particular it informed students on the benefits of undertaking a WBP. Thirteen host organisations that attended this event offered Masters projects. Indeed, almost half of the projects that were successfully completed that year were initiated from this event evidencing a much greater level of student engagement than previously. The additional bonuses were enhanced engagement of staff, and indeed the University, with MMM in addition to the increased profile of the University to businesses. This event is now held annually.

### **4.1.2 Enhancing Student Transition Through WBPs**

The following years allowed much better opportunity for engagement with students within the swift and demanding confines of their master's Programmes. The MMM PC is now routinely invited to many Programme Inductions that take place in the initial week of study. This introduces the opportunity of undertaking WBPs along with an informal invitation to the forthcoming Employer Engagement Event which is held later that semester. The various MMM flyers and Quick Guides from the Toolkit are useful in providing further key information and help provide legitimacy of MMM and its processes. These brief information sessions are considered to be an important first step in enhancing student engagement and provide students with the luxury of time to consider their options into the type of Masters dissertation they wish to undertake allowing opportunity for better choices. The initial Employer Engagement Event also helped to incentivise staff to embed teaching that supports the student transition throughout the WBP journey. Thus, many Programmes offer students



sessions on employability and career management skills which are timed appropriately. For example students may be provided with workshops on networking and making an elevator pitch before the Employer Engagement Event while workshops on CV preparation and interviews are provided afterwards to help them prepare for recruitment onto WBPs. In addition, the majority of students attend Presentation Skills Workshops delivered by an external consultant which offer techniques to control the voice, nervous tension and body language so as to enhance confidence in networking and oral presentation. Workshops and one-to-one sessions are offered through CDC which remains a key component in the governance of MMM at Stirling. These, along with the MMM PC and the external consultant support the student transition in a similar, but with a different timed programme, as shown in Fig 2. In addition, the MMM Online Education materials, now launched at Stirling, are of value. The degree of student engagement in the Employer Engagement Event, and hence, WBPs is now clearly evidenced in that the majority of students register for the event without the need for any prompting. Indeed, approximately one third of taught postgraduate students in SNS undertook a work related/work based project in the last academic year.

On request from a Programme Director a personal development course that aimed to help participants enhance their self-efficacy was delivered over a period of six weeks. Evaluation was undertaken using a comparative questionnaire at the start and the end of the course along with round table discussions in the final session. These showed that the course was well received with students and helped enhance self-efficacy. This was encapsulated by a Programme Director saying "In some ways it has had a transformative effect prompting new levels of student engagement within the University."

A recent innovation has been the development of a "Talking Mats" resource ([www.talkingmats.com/](http://www.talkingmats.com/)) for transition in and out of the workplace for WBPs, placements and work related projects. This uses specially designed picture symbols to allow improved communication, clear reflection on the transitions and provides a chance to reflect on the impact of the experience on learning and employability. Recently, a Talking Mat has been trialled on whether to undertake a WBP or a traditional academic project. This has proved valuable to some students and has helped them gain insights into what concerns they may have and what they wish to achieve from the dissertation project.

The period of MMM at Stirling has seen an enhanced uptake and completion of student WBPs. This transition has been facilitated by introduction of opportunities at Programme inductions and throughout the degree Programme using taught sessions, use of appropriate documentation, online learning, workshops and events.

## 5 Summary

Across the life of the MMM project and the collaborative partner institutions, key themes for support of students transitioning into and through WBPs were shared. While each institution may have differing processes, needs and aims, students across the partners appeared to have similar needs and challenges to overcome when considering a WBP and transitioning into and through it.

**Fear Factor:** Students were, and remain, cautious when considering a WBP. A WBP was seen as something new and different to the classical university research based dissertation. To this end all partner universities had to support students, initially with awareness raising of

WBP opportunities, but also to equip students with knowledge as to what the differences and opportunities the two types of dissertation (academic and work based) projects may entail for them.

**Dissertation Choice:** The decision on whether to undertake a WBP is not always straight forward. To support students in choosing which type of dissertation to take, students were supported with information sessions and also reflective sessions where they could consider which project type would suit them. Students would relate it to their current skill sets, their future career paths, their academic interests and their personal development, to enable them to make a choice.

**Preparing for the Project:** Feedback from students and host organisations across the partner MMM Universities highlighted the need for transitioning into the workplace support. One to one support for students, workshops, information sessions, mixer nights, project interviews and quick guides all contribute to preparing students for entering into the host organisation's working culture. In addition meetings between academic supervisors, host organisations and the students take place prior to the project starting, to introduce all stakeholders, refine projects and outline and agree the practicalities of the project. Many of these are done on site with the host organisations, acting as an introduction to the workplace for the placed student.

**Through the Project:** While on the project, WBP coordinators along with host and academic supervisors support the project student. This can take the form of regular project meetings and the WBP coordinator can act as a point of contact for any queries which the student may have. In addition sessions to support the project, such as project planning and management were provided and also online self-accessible resources (Aberdeen VLE).

**Reflecting on the WBP:** Reflecting on the learning gained during the WBP allows students to gain the full benefit of the WBP experience. Reflective workshop sessions and online reflective material support students to consider the skills gained during the WBP. In addition, highlighting the benefits of using Career Service resources to build on the experience and learning gained during the WBP when considering future career directions.

The three partner MMM institutions have a diversity of experience when considering WBPs. While the "one size does not fit all" approach is key to MMMs success and mode of support, it is clear that the benefits of partnership working has allowed the key areas of WBP transition support to be highlighted. The support for each WBP transition point may be implemented differently in each HEI in order to complement the institutional needs and processes, but the key support areas are one across the partners. This "picture" of the WBP landscape allowed the cumulative experience of the partners to be drawn together and focused on supporting these transition points, ultimately resulting in the WBP toolkit. The WBP toolkit supports these transition points across diverse processes by providing guidance, complemented by adaptable materials that can be tailored to fit individual institutional contexts and disciplines in keeping with the "one size does not fit all" ethos.

## **Acknowledgement**

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For more information on the project and the WBP toolkit please visit

<http://www.mastersprojects.ac.uk/>

