

**Student Placements and Communities of Practice:
Opportunities and Challenges**

Melanie Prideaux and Caroline Starkey
University of Leeds

with Alexandra Farrell and Lara Howard

ABSTRACT

At a time when increasing societal demand for religious literacy is coupled with pressure on UK universities to provide robust 'employability' provision for students, this paper will examine the role of placements as part of the academic study of religion. 'Communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998) will be used as a framework to support an interrogation of the student journey between the academy and the placement organisation and will open up critical questions about the ethical dimension to the placement opportunity. A practical account of how this is experienced, evidenced and problematized for students will be provided through a case study of the final year 'External Placement' module at the University of Leeds which will support the argument that the development of skills, and an awareness of the nature and practice of the student's expertise, is fundamental to both academic development and to the potential for students to make applied use of their undergraduate studies after graduation.

KEYWORDS

Theology & Religious Studies (TRS); Communities of Practice; Pedagogy;
Expertise; Career and Development;

* * *

Introduction

Placements have been part of the University of Leeds Religious Studies curriculum for several years and have more recently been opened out to all students across our school of Philosophy, Religion and History of Science (including our Liberal Arts programme). The most important and substantial placement opportunity is provided in the final year when students can undertake an external placement as the basis for academic research and reflection and the production of a project report (equivalent to a final year dissertation). This placement provides a key opportunity for undergraduates to identify, use and reflect upon the skills they have been developing through their programme, and will continue to use after graduation. The placement also opens up an opportunity to reflect upon the status of the student as a developing 'expert'. Using our experience as placement module students, supervisors and module leaders, in this article we will consider the nature of the undergraduate placement experience, how the concept of communities of practice enables us to interrogate the application and engagement of the student's developing expertise, and finally the ethical issues in undergraduate research that the placement opportunity exposes

In this article, two former students, Alexandra and Lara (graduated 2020) reflect on their own placement experience at a local museum. As well as being actively involved in reviewing and drafting the article they have also provided their own commentary, from which we quote directly, to inform the development of the argument. Although we recognise this is only a very limited set of student experience to draw from, their voices add to the texture of this analysis and ground the discussion in the experience of placement students. Although we recognise them as co-authors, we have referred to them as a source throughout in order to clarify the relationship between our different contributions.

The Placement Module

In the study of religion, expertise is locally and contextually defined. A student may have a programme experience which is orientated towards theology, religious studies, philosophy, sociology – depending on the institution where they study but often also on their own module choices through their programme. As such, we are not going to claim that there is one way to do placements – this will look very different in different institutions. Instead, we are discussing the potential for final year placements, potentially in any academic context, to provide the 'capstone' of a degree – providing an opportunity for the student to demonstrate their ability to evidence, develop, and share their expertise beyond the more traditional model of the dissertation.

In order to pursue our argument, we are using the experience of one module at the University of Leeds and drawing on our shared experience as students and educators. Mel and Caroline, as academics, share a particular approach to our teaching and research which is informed by our non-academic careers. We both draw on experience of our previous careers (as a teacher and a social worker) which shape our understanding of the value and social impact of our research but also of our teaching. We are conscious that through our teaching and facilitation we are shaping individuals who will, as a result of their

undergraduate experience, move on to careers which will have an impact in all sorts of dimensions of public life. We are committed to supporting students to pursue their ambitions through giving them confidence in their own expertise and capacity. The placement module is one context where we both feel this impact is especially felt.

The External Placement module, developed initially by our colleague Professor Rachel Muers, is taken in the final year of study and replaces a 'traditional' extended essay or dissertation. The aim of the module is to provide students with an opportunity to apply the knowledge they have developed over their degree programme to a non-academic context. Over the course of their final year of study, students on the External Placement module complete fifty hours of placement activity with a named partner organisation, in the main, local to Leeds. These organisations range from statutory bodies, such as the Local Authority, the NHS and the Police, to smaller, locally based (and often religiously-inspired) charities and organisations, as well as private sector businesses, such as legal firms. Students take one of two pathways through the module, either the research or the reflective experience pathway. Students who take the research pathway typically undertake a focused research study, on a topic required by the placement organisation, in order to investigate a subject that is important to core business. Those on the reflective experience pathway follow a more typical 'internship model', where they undertake several tasks for the placement organisation over the year and reflect on their experience overall, focusing on a specific and relevant theme of their choosing.

Students on both pathways are required to complete a regular reflective log, as well as an oral presentation and final project report of 8,000 words at the end of the placement. Placement providers are invited to the oral presentation, and the written report, which typically contains a series of recommendations for the organisation, is shared with them. The module has five compulsory workshops where the group of placement students are brought together, initially to discuss the expectations surrounding the module (including assessment) but also to provide research skills and support in learning specific methodologies, including qualitative interviewing and survey skills which many on the research pathway employ to further their projects. Alongside these workshops, students can expect at least five hours of one-to-one academic supervision, and regular, ongoing placement supervision within the organisation with which they are placed.

From the start of the module, students are informed that their role is to learn and to develop skills, but importantly also to bring their own expertise and knowledge. This might be in the form of subject-specific knowledge drawn from their studies, or in terms of research skills they have developed through their degree and which might be applied to a time-limited project to further the business of the placement organisation. Each year, a range of placement options are available for students to choose from, and they are allocated on a competitive basis, principally based on a written personal statement. In this statement, students are expected to both highlight what skills they wish to develop on the placement, and importantly, what skills they will bring to the organisation. Students are often surprised that the emphasis on the expertise they have already developed is built into the placement module from the start. Most students begin their placements with trepidation, uncertain as to what might be expected of them, and are under-confident about whether they will be

able to apply their academic skills to a non-academic setting. Both Alexandra and Lara felt initially 'out of their depth' in their placement at a local museum, despite a high level of support provided by the placement supervisor. Lara commented that:

I did not consider myself to be much of an expert at the start of the placement, as I was unsure, to an extent, what exactly the placement would entail, and what aspects of my academic knowledge could be applied to the placement. Moreover, I did not consider myself to be an expert in general.

They had been tasked with supporting the development of a public exhibition, and this was the first time that either had been involved in something of this nature. Neither were entirely convinced that they had developed suitable skills that could be readily applied outside the academy, and they were not sure what to expect in the working environment. Alexandra's and Lara's experiences are common ones at the start of the module, and when the idea of students having existing expertise is raised in the first academic-led workshop session, many respond with cautious incredulity. As we demonstrate, the perception of expertise changes rapidly as students' progress through the module, although this does not occur without some challenge, the nature of which depends on the individual student, their expectations and experiences, and the support provided throughout the placement, both academic and non-academic.

Each placement provider, however, typically approaches the start of the placement and any assessment of expertise quite differently. Particularly in the smaller organisations, but also reflected in the larger, students are perceived as already skilled, particularly in terms of being able to undertake research projects and complete work-based tasks to high-levels of satisfaction. Thus, students are generally highly valued by the placement providers. There is an initial mismatch, then, between the student's own perception of their expertise, and that understood by the placement providers. Helping placement providers to understand students' initial reticence to put themselves forward as experts is a key early site of negotiation between the student, the placement provider, and the University. From the other side, part of the role of support during the placement (both from the University, but also the external partner) is to help students to develop confidence in their existing expertise, alongside developing new skills.

Communities of Practice and the TRS Placement Student

In order to better understand what is happening in this dynamic between the placement provider and the student, we have found the concept of 'Communities of Practice' to be helpful. Many people have come across the concept of communities of practice in managerial or organisational contexts. Hughes et al. (2007) suggest that 'the concept has been applied so widely that, on occasion, it has seemed in danger of losing specificity and analytical edge, sliding into a catch-all descriptive term.' We are using the term here not in this descriptive sense, nor indeed in the sense of it being a model for educational practice, but instead as an analytical tool – a way of drawing attention and asking questions about what happens in the placement experience. Using

communities of practice in this way draws attention to the context as well as the individual, so the impact of the individual on their context becomes more clearly a topic for enquiry, as here. The concept of communities of practice was developed by Lave and Wenger and was a key moment in a shift which has evolved over centuries from thinking of education as 'a psychological process located in the heads of individuals' (Hughes et al., 2007), to understanding better the mechanisms by which learning happens through 'increasing participation (with others) in the relevant and inevitably structured social practices (activities, tasks, habits) of the community' (Fuller, 2007). Wenger, who with Lave first developed the notion of the community of practice and has been most responsible for its development (especially into managerial contexts) since described communities of practice as:

[...] the basic building blocks of a social learning system because they are the social 'containers' of the competencies that make up such a system. By participating in these communities, we define with each other what constitutes competence in a given context. (Wenger, 2000, 229)

The placement is the opportunity for the student to move into a new social container (from the university to the workplace) carrying with them a level of expertise (Wenger's 'competence') from the academic community of practice, into a different community of practice where they are both novice in the specific professional context but also expert in their knowledge, understanding, and skills around the subject specific content of their degree programme.

To some extent the evolution of expertise in the academic context is incomplete for the undergraduate. The graduate reaches a level of expertise sufficient to attain recognition (the degree) but insufficient to be seen as an expert member of the community of practice of the university, where doctoral qualification is usually considered a signifier of expertise. As Alexandra notes, expertise 'is a relative term- an undergrad is an expert in their field relative to a high school student, but not relative to a PhD student. There is no checklist you can tick off to become an expert, or line you can cross.' The graduate leaves with a degree that confers on them recognition that they have achieved a level of expertise which would be assumed to be significant in contrast to the unqualified, they may be perceived as 'expert' externally. However, the graduate will still be understood as 'novice' within the academic community of practice. The implications of this are significant and visible in the placement context.

When the student enters the world of the placement, they are bringing together two communities of practice – that of the university and that of the placement organisation. They are externally seen as 'expert' in their discipline, sufficient to add value to the organisation where they undertake their placement. The fact that they are supervised by an academic member of staff serves to underline that they are nonetheless not considered to be expert within the academic community of practice – though this might not always be clearly understood in the organisation where the placement is undertaken. The placement student is also 'novice' within the placement context. They are a novice to the community of practice of the organisation where they undertake their placement. The complexity of these intersections underlies some of the tensions and challenges around placements but also some of the benefits, both

academically and personally. The visible and hidden expectations, and the experience for the student and placement provider, are all significant in understanding both how placements work and how they may be challenged and challenging. This intersection of communities of practice is directly responsible for the ethical issues that arise from placements. Analysing the placement experience through the lens of communities of practice thus assists in understanding the nature of expertise, the process of movement from the university to the placement context, the tensions that arise within placements, and the ethical issues which need to be understood and articulated.

How then are students supported to make this transition and navigate these intersecting communities of practice and their status as 'expert'? There are two key dimensions: induction and supervision.

Induction

The student undertaking the placement is doing so as a 'final year project' a capstone project which at the University of Leeds is understood quite explicitly in relation to the academic community of practice (the disciplinary group):

This piece of work is seen by students as the pinnacle of their academic achievement, not only because of the academic rigour that is imposed on it by the University, but also because of the control they have to design, carry out and evaluate what they do. It is often seen to represent the point at which students become truly members of a disciplinary group (University of Leeds 2020).

Given the extent to which the student has control over the project but must navigate the new world of the placement context, induction is pivotal to supporting students to make the transition towards operating as an expert in the placement. Students meet as a group for initial training which covers working with the placement provider, the limits and expectations of their activity, and health and safety. The student then takes the lead in contacting the placement provider and arranging the initial supervisory meeting. This is fundamental to the way in which induction supports the student to understand their role as that of expert and encourages independent working and initiative. The student is not a passive receiver of an experience upon which they reflect, but the active lead in establishing and shaping the placement. As Alexandra explains,

This reinforces the expertise of the student to the placement organisation from the outset and sets this placement apart from other work experience/internships that they might be used to, which tend to be more focused on the student doing whatever the organisation wants/needs, rather than actively suggesting projects.

This approach also inflects the way in which induction supports the development of the project. Each project is as unique as the student – shaped in response to a placement brief by the student's expertise and interest. Induction gives them the confidence, highlights their existing skills, and provides a framework within which the student navigates transition between two

communities of practice and their differing levels of expertise within each. Induction is also an ongoing process. Students have regular workshops to address their training and other development gaps, and they take responsibility for identifying their collective and individual needs. Placement students are supported to develop reflective practice which enables them to articulate, develop and operationalise their expertise within the placement context. They are both bringing and developing expertise as they engage across the two communities of practice.

The process of induction therefore does more than support students to navigate processes, it also develops in them a sense of confidence in their academic ownership and skill, and the tools by which to demonstrate these in the placement setting. They are supported to understand themselves as taking the expertise of their academic community of practice into the organisational community of practice, where they will inhabit their role as an 'expert' whilst also beginning again as a 'novice'. Navigating this tension is managed through careful supervision.

Supervision

Key to the navigation of the intersecting communities of practice, and the different role of the student, is dual supervision. The student receives academic supervision from a member of academic staff, usually with interest, experience, or expertise in the placement area. This academic supervision supports assessment engagement, which includes the reflective logs, an oral presentation towards the end of the placement, and a final extended essay of 8,000 words (examples of which are shared on the Community Religions Project website). Yet, importantly, the academic supervisor also provides an environment in which the student can receive more advanced and specific academic guidance. The student is engaging still in a process of situated learning within the academic community of practice, making sense of the placement with the 'more expert' supervisor who can guide them on appropriate bodies of scholarly literature, overarching theories and methodologies, and with how to articulate academic content for a non-expert audience. This academic supervision supports the student to bring their academic expertise into the placement setting. In this sense the academic community of practice is pulled, by the student, into the placement community of practice not only through their own activity but also through the shaping of student activity by academic supervision.

The placement supervisor on the other hand is engaging with the student as organisational novice but also subject expert. They will support the student's engagement with the organisation and the student's growing expertise within the organisational community of practice. They will also negotiate with the student how the student's expertise is deployed – agreeing a research project if appropriate or negotiating placement activity where the student can add value but also be furnished with experience to inform their academic reflections. It is in this relationship where the student (and supervisor) must negotiate the limits of the student's expertise and the expectations of the placement provider.

Constant communication and negotiation, between student, placement supervisor and academic supervisor is vital to the placement opportunity. The module leader, overseeing the induction and then supervision process, is a vital

feature of the success of the module. The module leader is both facilitator and trainer, monitor and assessor of the activity for individual students and for the group. One of the ways the module leader supports student development throughout the placement is via a series of 'reflective logs' that the students are required to submit at intervals (and which carry a percentage of the overall mark). Students are given guidance on what questions need to be answered by each the logs, and ongoing feedback is provided by the module leader, offering developmental ideas, support and advice. Students often find the logs difficult to write at first and it is the self-reflective aspect (in particular, thinking about the skills that they might be developing and an appropriate first-person style and tone) that they typically find most challenging. Throughout the log entries, students are encouraged to think about the ways in which their expectations, project ideas and skills have developed across the placement, bringing them to a place where they are more clearly able to see personal change over time. The logs also function to ensure students have a formal academic outlet for support and monitoring. The reflective log assessment complements the assessed oral presentation that students are required to do towards the end of the placement. Both placement and academic supervisors are invited to this event, where students present an overview of their placement and the key themes that they have been considering. Academic supervisors, and the module leader, encourage students to develop their communication skills and strategies for different audiences, including through the more informal reflective logs, the formal (academic) written research reports, and in the oral presentation.

While the module leader creates the context and facilitates the engagement which leads to a successful placement, it is the student who experiences and manages their transition between the communities of practice, with the support of their supervisors. The supervisor is the expert within the community of practice – either that of the academy or the placement organisation. In both communities the student is managing their status between expert and novice. This status management is challenging. Rather than a straightforward process of apprenticeship often presented in the literature on communities of practice, the student is instead experiencing an iterative process of development and status change which more accurately reflects the lived realities of most graduate jobs. As such, the content of the placement in terms of the development of knowledge, understanding and skills is only one feature of the opportunity. It is the process of navigating the two communities of practice, and the student's status, which provides key transferable skills which will equip the student for the future. Both Alexandra and Lara recognised that more was happening in their placement than simply learning about a place of work or how to conduct research in a different context, but that instead they were involved in a process of negotiation between the two communities of practice that was supporting their intellectual development. Lara captures this development in her reflection that:

My own perception of expertise had changed by the end of the placement. As time passed during the placement, I became more aware of the focus and input I had on the placement, with the realisation that my knowledge and expertise on the subject of religion could not only be applied to the 'Religion' section of the exhibition, but aided in further

developing how religion should be presented within a museum space, through the placement and treatment of religious objects, as well as using my own knowledge and research skills to write labels for the objects on display.

Using communities of practice as a lens through which to reflect on the placement process reveals dimensions of the experience and the learning opportunity which might otherwise be less apparent. The nature of the induction and supervisory process of the module is to enable the student to understand, navigate and capitalise on their 'in-between' status as both expert and novice.

What are the ethics of the placement?

Analysing placement experiences through an understanding of the intersection of communities of practice raises some significant ethical challenges. We have already noted tensions about expectations placed on students and perceptions of benefit. These are fundamentally ethical concerns which must be grappled with in order not just to ensure the individual placement project is robust but also to ensure that the placement experience itself is ethically justified.

Within higher education, placement experience has a taken for granted value based on students receiving the benefit of the opportunity. The placement is therefore not always considered as ethically significant. However, we believe there are ethical dimensions which extend beyond those which might relate to the conduct of research as part of the placement. At its most basic the risk involved with any activity where the student receives support and time from an organisation is that the organisation receives no benefit from this investment. In many placement contexts (e.g. nursing) the training benefit is seen to outweigh the demand raised by the placement. Without the placement learning there would be no new nurses and the implications of this are obvious. However, with a placement which does not have a professional training component there is no necessary benefit – the placement work itself must have inherent benefit for the organisation and the student if their investment of time or resource is to be justified. Often the benefit for the organisation is in a piece of work which needs to be done. Many internships work on this basis – the student is paid to undertake a piece of work and in doing so the organisation benefits from having the work done but the student also benefits from paid work experience.

The students on the placement module are receiving benefit – the placement provides the basis for their academic work for this capstone project of their degree. It is not a 'work experience placement' as such – the placement is a research placement where the student is either bringing their expertise to a project defined by the organisation or are analytically reflecting on the placement experience. The students are not paid for their work, but the hours are part of the time commitment for the module, so it is not 'additional' work. Students receive the benefits of a work experience placement where the demands on them are manageable within their studies because the placement is time limited and flexible. However, it is important to be continually conscious of hidden exclusions and exploitations that may be occurring in the placement context. Alan et al. (2013) unpick the issues of exclusion which operate in relation to unpaid work placements in the creative industries and argue that

'Work placements are not just about learning about the world of work, but a "filtering site" in which students are evaluated through classifying practices that privilege middle-class ways of being' (2013, 433).

In the placement module students are placed with an organisation by the module leader, rather than the organisation, and efforts are made to secure a placement for as many students as possible. During the application process, prospective placement students are informed of the different placement organisations (and the kinds of work that has been done by students in the past) and are asked to select two potential options, as well as provide a short personal statement. In the application statement, they are asked to outline why they want either of these two placements, what skills they hope to gain and, importantly, what skills they bring with them. These statements are then assessed by the module leader, and students are matched with appropriate placements. Students are told from the start that placement application success is not predicated on previous grades, but instead on their willingness to be involved, their individual interests, and their desire to apply their knowledge outside the academy. If a student does not get their first or second choice, sometimes a third is offered (where there is a gap, and interests are matched) and students are given a further choice. To this extent therefore it is hoped that potential exclusionary practices are avoided. We do not have the data to do a retrospective analysis of the students who take the module, though we hope to be able to do this analysis in the future. Our impression is that the students taking placements reflect fairly well the diversity of the cohort, though this needs to be understood in more detail.

We feel that the ethical issues surrounding students undertaking unpaid placements are sufficiently addressed by the contextual framing that ensures students receive explicit benefit in a managed and manageable placement. The student therefore clearly receives benefit from their investment. However, the benefit for the organisation may not always be as tangible, and therefore the ethical issue of whether their investment is ethically justified needs to be explored. In most cases there is a straightforward output of the placement in the form of a research report. The organisation sets a brief, and the student completes the task, drawing on their subject expertise which the organisation would not normally have access to. In some cases, these reports directly impact on the work of an organisation, in others they inform activity. There is clear reciprocity – the organisation has supported and engaged the student and in return they receive an output. In projects which are reflective there is less often an output which can be shared with the organisation, or which would be of clear benefit to the organisation. The organisation may benefit from the student undertaking specific activity with them (e.g. volunteering hours) but on some occasions there will not even be this benefit – the student is largely observing. What we find continually interesting is that, nevertheless, organisations are happy to have students on placement. Despite our honesty about the limits of reciprocity organisations are willing to give up their time in order to support the developing expertise of the student.

Again, it is useful to think in terms of communities of practice to analyse the motivations of organisations who are willing to have students on placement where there may be limited benefit for the organisation (and we might therefore be concerned about whether it is ethical). For the organisation, hosting a placement student is an opportunity to share a community of practice and to

explore the intersection of that community with the university. The benefit that is experienced is in terms of being able to reflect with a 'novice' on the nature of the community of practice, and to benefit from seeing this reflected back with the expertise that the student brings from their studies, and from their membership of the university community. Individuals and organisations support placements out of a desire to provide an opportunity and increase awareness of their own work; it is often seen as a benefit in itself to introduce the student, and by extension other students, into the organisation and build awareness of the organisation among the student population. That the student is bringing expertise about religion is often another important part of the organisational commitment to hosting a placement student. The ability to reflect with someone who is actively interested and engaged in a dimension of activity and identity (religion) that is often under engaged in the organisation becomes a reciprocal benefit. Alexandra notes of her own experience with her placement supervisor that: 'He allowed us the freedom to explore and use the placement as we wanted and understood that all of us would get the most out of it by allowing us to do this.' This level of engagement from placement providers evidences the extent to which, in successful placements, there is a degree of partnership working which mitigates risk in terms of undue demands being placed on placement providers or students.

Gallagher et al. (2014), discussing undergraduate research in clinical disciplines, handily express their argument in the title of their paper: 'Undergraduate Research Involving Human Subjects Should not be Granted Ethical Approval Unless it is Likely to be of Publishable Quality.' Their argument is that the risk of harm, discomfort or inconvenience is such that research should only be pursued if the results are such that they can be shared and impact future clinical practice. In the context of placements, where a research output is not shared the placement itself provides a benefit to the organisation. As such, this ethical concern is addressed. However, this discussion (which may appear somewhat peripheral) is potentially critical to thinking about the role and benefits of placements in student education. The balance of risks, commitments and activity should be such that there is reciprocal benefit – expertise is shared and the student benefits through the benefit to their future ambition and their studies, while the organisation benefits either from an agreed output or a productive engagement with a student who brings their own expertise to the organisation.

Underpinning this discussion of the ethics of placements is the understanding and recognition of the student as an 'expert'. One of the key tensions that can emerge in the placement is about what the student can be reasonably expected to do, not only in terms of their time (not least, because 50 hours of placement activity is a limited time commitment) but also in terms of the limits of their expertise as an undergraduate student. Although an undergraduate student can bring a range of expertise to the placement context, they are not an experienced researcher. They are, in academic terms, still in their apprenticeship. As already discussed, academic supervision is key in supporting the student to navigate their position and to recognise both the expertise they bring (e.g. knowledge of theoretical frameworks, research methodology, and about communities and practices) but also the limits. These limits include the fact that the placement is not an opportunity for an organisation to access academic research expertise 'on the cheap'. Although

this is not a tension we have experienced in the placements, it is nevertheless a potential dynamic we are always aware of. At times, we have negotiated with placement supervisors to support them to recognise and understand the limitations placed on students (both to do with assessment timeframes, and their developing expertise) but even in these cases, placement providers have routinely responded with support for what the student needs, and ongoing interest in promoting their professional development.

Conclusion

Using our experience of final year undergraduate placements, this article has interrogated a variety of features of the undergraduate student placement experience which we believe are important in understanding both the student and placement organisation experience of placements. Engaging with the intersection of the academic and workplace environment requires students to navigate their own expertise, and its limitations, and challenges them to reflect on the ethical issues involved in the exercise of skills or knowledge from their undergraduate programme. The student exercises autonomy as an independent learner in their development of skills but negotiates an outcome with the placement provider which supports them to understand the practical application and value of their knowledge and skills beyond the academy. This negotiation and navigation prepares students for the world after university, understanding how their transferable, as well as programme specific skills and knowledge, are of value in contexts well beyond the academic.

By analysing the placement experience through the lens of communities of practice, and through attention to the ethical implications of the placement opportunity, we have recognised a range of questions about the undergraduate student experience and the way in which universities prepare students for their future ambitions. In a higher education sector where we are more attentive than ever to our students' outcomes after graduation, the placement opportunity is clearly an outstanding opportunity to support students to understand and apply their academic learning beyond the academic context. In an ideal world all students would have the opportunity to take part in an experience that has the potential to be so significant. However, there are practical limitations on the opportunities to engage in a placement. Put simply, even with so few students taking religious studies degrees there are insufficient placement opportunities for all students to undertake a placement. There is a challenge here for all undergraduate programmes in TRS to ask how they can provide the opportunity for such significant personal, professional and academic development for students. If it cannot be provided through placements, what are the other opportunities that can be made available for students to apply their learning in unfamiliar contexts, and so develop their ability to operationalise their expertise after they graduate?

References

- Allen, K., Quinn, J. Hollingworth, S., and Rose, A. (2013) 'Becoming employable students and 'ideal' creative workers: exclusion and inequality in higher education work placements', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, vol. 34, no. 3, pp. 431-452.
- British Academy (2020) *Qualified for the Future: Quantifying demand for arts, humanities and social science skills*. Available from: www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/skills-qualified-future-quantifying-demand-arts-humanities-social-science/ (Accessed 25 November 2020).
- Fuller, A. (2007) 'Critiquing theories of learning and communities of practice', in Hughes, J., Jewson, N., and Unwin, L. (eds) *Communities of Practice: Critical Perspectives*, Oxon, Routledge, pp. 17-29.
- Gallagher, C., McDonald, L., and McCormack, N. (2014). 'Undergraduate Research Involving Human Subjects Should not be Granted Ethical Approval Unless it is Likely to be of Publishable Quality,' *HEC Forum*, vol. 26, no. 2, pp. 169-180. doi.org/10.1007/s10730-013-9232-2.
- Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies (2009) *Employability Where next? Unlocking the potential of your theology or religious studies degree*. Available from: aulre.org/heaprsarchive/emp_guide_trs.pdf (Accessed 25 November 2020).
- Hughes, J., Jewson, N., and Unwin, L. (2007) 'Communities of practice: a contested concept in flux', in Hughes, J., Jewson, N., and Unwin, L. (eds) *Communities of Practice: Critical Perspectives*, Oxon, Routledge, pp. 1-16.
- Institute of Physics (2014) *The Physics Degree: Graduate Skills Base and the Core of Physics*. http://iop.cld.iop.org/education/higher_education/accreditation/file_64166.pdf.
- Knott, K. (2010) 'Insider/Outsider Perspectives', in Hinnells, J. (ed) *Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, Oxon, Routledge, pp. 259-273.
- QAA (2019) *Subject Benchmark Statement: Theology and Religious Studies*. Available from: www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/subject-benchmark-statements/sbs-theology-religious-studies.pdf (Accessed 25 November 2020).
- University of Leeds (2020) 'Final Year Project and Assessment.' Available from: ses.leeds.ac.uk/info/22222/the_leeds_curriculum/1126/final_year_project_and_assessment (Accessed 25 November 2020).
- Wenger, E. (2000) 'Communities of Practice and Social Learning Systems. Organization', vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 225-246.