

Briefing note

Roles, responsibilities, background and current position regarding work based learning opportunities in Northern Ireland

1 Purpose

- 1.1 The purpose of this note is to provide better clarity and understanding for students either, currently enrolled or who in the future may consider enrolling on the BSc (Hons) Environmental Health undergraduate programme at the University of Ulster Jordanstown (UUJ).

2 Background and context

- 2.1 The course at UUJ is currently one of thirteen undergraduate programmes accredited by the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH)
- 2.2 The CIEH is a professional, awarding and campaigning body at the forefront of environmental and public health. As such we determine a core curriculum for undergraduate study as well as accrediting those universities who wish to offer this curriculum. Our educational programmes and standards must continue to be tailored to fully equip practitioners fully for the widening career opportunities available to them, and to meet the skills needs of employers.
- 2.3 Many graduate environmental health practitioners (EHPs) seek employment within the local government sector in the United Kingdom, typically as environmental health officers (EHOs) where they are likely to be engaged, amongst other things, in fulfilling their employer's statutory responsibilities in a number of health protection regulation and enforcement areas. Typical areas that this includes are food safety and standards, health and safety and environmental protection.
- 2.4 Local authorities are required to appoint suitably qualified and competent officers to such positions. One of the benchmarks they look for insofar as the appointment of EHOs is concerned is that the individual in question holds a certificate issued by the Environmental Health Registration Board (EHRB).
- 2.5 EHRB awards such certificate to individual who have:-
- Satisfactorily completed their academic studies on a CIEH accredited degree programme.
 - Successfully complete their experiential learning portfolio (ELP) via work based learning (WBL) see 2.6 below.
 - Successfully have taken their CIEH professional examinations.
- 2.6 ELP and WBL commenced in March 2004 and was effectively the replacement for the Practical Training Logbook which had been directing the practical training of environmental health students since 1997/98.
- 2.7 The new ELP was specifically designed to support a new curriculum for accredited environmental health degree courses which has been in the process of being phased in since September 2003. Information on the ELP is available at www.cieh.org/careers_and_development.
- 2.8 The 2003 curriculum was in turn developed to support Environmental Health 2012 – A key partner in delivering the public health agenda (EH2012) www.cieh.org/knowledge/public_health/environmental_health_2012

This work and the resultant document projects a future in which the practice of environmental health is based on a modern health development agenda, best practice and evidence of what works.

- 2.9 EH2012 is a key piece of work that if realised, will significantly assist the CIEH's campaign to position EHPs at the heart of public health policy and practice in the UK. This will in turn, we believe, contribute to even more career opportunities for EHPs in the future.

3 Background to placement/work based learning opportunities in NI

- 3.1 There are currently twenty-six local authorities in Northern Ireland each of which employ graduate EHPs who hold an EHRB Certificate as EHOs for the purposes referred to at 2.3. Collectively through the environmental health group system (which is unique to Northern Ireland) local authorities here have always offered a number of 'placement' opportunities for environmental health students.
- 3.2 These 'placements' have been and continue to be, around twelve months in duration. Again this is largely as a result of historical precedent. The new ELP process does not require any minimum length of time as a prerequisite to its completion. Decisions regarding the duration of these placements and the operational organisation of the same rest with the local authorities themselves and more specifically with the Training Liaison Group (TLG) which is a sub group of the Chief Environmental Health Officers (CEHOG) network.
- 3.3 From around the mid 1990s the demand for such training placements has been increasing, primarily due to the fact that the student intake into the environmental health undergraduate programme at UJJ was rising as a result of increased applications from school leavers.
- 3.4 By and large this trend has continued which perhaps in itself is not unsurprising for a number of reasons. The environmental health undergraduate programme at UJJ consistently produced high calibre EHPs; there remains in a UK context a significant shortage of EHOs, with many vacant positions in local authorities particularly in England. Added to this, graduate EHPs are increasingly finding career opportunities outside local government and for all of these reasons, and many more, a career in environmental health is an attractive prospect for school leavers.
- 3.5 Whilst in the past the number of placement opportunities within the local authority sector has kept pace with the number of students seeking such placements this is no longer the case for the reasons outlined at 3.3 and 3.4.
- 3.6 However, the introduction of ELP and WBL has meant significant positive changes from a student's perspective. These are outlined in the following section.

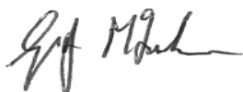
4 Work based learning opportunities and responsibilities in NI

- 4.1 A very significant point to note before expanding upon current WBL opportunities in NI is the fundamental changes that the transition from the previous logbook system and associated placement to the ELP and associated WBL has brought about namely
- a. Students no longer are required to complete a specific time period of WBL in order to complete their ELP. The ELP system is based on demonstrating outcomes not inputs and is, as a consequence, less prescriptive than its predecessor, the logbook.
 - b. In practical terms this allows students not only the opportunity to seek placement opportunities and possibilities outside the local authority sector but also the flexibility to take WBL opportunities potentially contributing to ELP out of term time at any stage during their undergraduate programme. WBL does not have to be continuous nor is it only relevant or acceptable during the current year three.
 - c. There is no absolute requirement for students to spend time with a local authority during the work based learning period. WBL and ELP evidence can be provided and acquired with a whole range of organisations. However, certain elements will require some time to be spent with an organisation involved in environmental health enforcement.

- 4.2 Universities normally help students find WBL opportunities and this continues at UJJ. In fact, the university has increased its efforts to find new, alternative WBL opportunities outside the local authority sector due to the increased demand for WBL opportunities. UJJ does not have any responsibility or obligation to find WBL opportunities for students. That responsibility rests with the individual student.
- 4.3 However, responsibility for the allocation of the already existing local authority WBL placements in NI has to lie with the University since it is the view of TLG that if the selection process was done by local authorities, they would be obliged to recruit through open advertisement. The cost of this would in effect result in a dramatic reduction in the number of places available and this is something that TLG does not believe to be in the interests of undergraduate students studying within NI.
- 4.4 In selecting students for these WBL places UJJ must utilise an equitable, arbitrary system of selection. In turn it must be capable of operating within their existing resources. Any other workable process other than random selection carries with it inappropriate bias.
- 4.5 In addition to opportunities within NI, UJJ students are free to seek WBL opportunities elsewhere. There are a number of these available in England, often with attractive salaries attached, and these are usually advertised in local newspapers and/or Environmental Health News (EHN) which any student enrolled on a CIEH accredited course can receive as a CIEH member.
- 4.6 It is highly unlikely that there will be any increase in the number of local authority placements available in the future. Nor is it likely that local authorities will move towards advertising these places along with the formal selection process that would have to accompany same unless there is a change in the way that the undergraduate programme is currently structured.

5 Conclusions and future options

- 5.1 I understand and fully appreciate that the current situation as outlined above means inevitably, that some students will be unable to attain a local authority placement here and for many that that remains their preferred option.
- 5.2 However, there are other opportunities for WBL within local authorities, most notably in England, that UJJ students can pursue; there are a number of alternative organisations where the enforcement and regulation aspects of ELP could be successfully achieved (for example within the Food Standards Agency (FSA) or Health and Safety Executive (HSE)); and both UJJ and CIEH in NI are working to try and increase future opportunities for WBL outside the local authority sector. There have been a number of such opportunities in the past for example Environment and Heritage Service (EHS); Dunnes Stores; and Sainsbury's.
- 5.3 Perhaps the students collectively could propose some alternatives that could operate within all of the necessary constraints and limitations outlined above? If a group of students wished to give this some thought then I would be happy to try and facilitate an opportunity for them to present these suggestions to the Professional Training Liaison Group (PTLC). PTLC is a group comprised of representatives from UJJ and TLG.



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