

# **A review of online placement experiences and reflections as part of the Professional Skills Enhancement module**

## **Helen Blackwell**

As part of the MSc Information and Library Studies course with Robert Gordon University, students have the opportunity to undertake a virtual placement linked to the 'Professional Skills Enhancement' module, which forms part of the PG Diploma stage. It gives students a chance to develop their understanding of current skills requirements within their discipline, develop key practical (professional and personal) skills and set a personal development plan for future skills development.

My virtual placement was undertaken in the academic session 2022-23 with the OneHE Information, Digital and Media Literacy (Mindsets) group, part of a larger forum called OneHE, a global online platform offering microlearning aimed at HE (Higher Education). Mindsets is the second largest group in OneHE. It is an online international community made up of students and professionals with an interest in promoting and supporting information, digital, and media literacy skills. The online Mindsets community currently has 364 members, and it shares projects, webinars, and relevant information with each other. The organisers have regular meetings (remotely) and organise collaborations with external speakers and groups to provide training or informative events for their members free.

As part of the Professional Skills Enhancement module, I was asked to develop a Personal Development Plan (PDP) which outlines the level of skills (professional and personal) prior to the placement with OneHE Mindsets, and post placement, together with a plan for continued improvement. The virtual placement included the following tasks:

- To collate resources and projects on information, media, and digital literacy
- To assist in the organising and delivery of live events in diverse formats (e.g., webinars, interactive/audience participation format)
- To look after the Twitter handle of the community
- To participate in monthly meetings and contribute to the community with interesting ideas for activities and events
- To participate in activities focusing on increasing member engagement, posting regularly to the community online feed, and keeping the community active

Research is one of my prominent interests and strengths and therefore looking for alternative terms/words, finding more specific topics, using advanced Boolean techniques, and attempting to source a range of materials was rewarding. I was able to contribute to the existing digital resources toolkit, updating its content to include 29 free online courses, 4 LibGuides, 4 video courses/talks (made up of 73 individual videos), and 10 organisation websites with information on digital, media, and information literacy.

I was also able to manage the Twitter feed with postings twice a week as well as the community communication forum, where I communicated student work, promoted events, and contributed links to articles of interest. Regular online contact with the supervisor and the team also took place, and there was a lot of collaboration through MS Teams meetings.

I was able to take part in webinars that were organised during the placement duration and undertake specific tasks, such as accepting participants to the session and looking after the chat communication area. These were well attended with delegates from various locations and backgrounds. One of the

online events, for example, involved a collaboration between the OneHE Mindsets community and SALCTG (the Scottish Academic Libraries Cooperative Training Group), where I was able to directly participate in meetings and contribute to team communications.

In addition, I was given autonomy to follow personal interests as part of the placement and I was able to analyse the activity levels and location of members which meant that a tailored approach to engagement could be undertaken in follow up activities with the community.

Via this online placement, I developed different professional skills, centred on research, social media communication, and events management. I was also able to further develop my attention to detail, my networking and teamwork skills. For example, at the start of the placement, most of my social media activity involved only basic likes and reposts/retweets being used, but by the end of the placement Twitter posts were being scheduled to be sent whilst offline, and hyperlinks in normal text was used, as well as utilising a range of platforms to promote information and events in different and targeted ways. In addition, I was able to further develop my communication skills, liaising with the OneHE Mindsets team and their members, but also with external people for upcoming event opportunities, and students to let them know about their work being published online.

One of the key challenges for any student may be lack of confidence and belief in personal and professional ability, so taking part in networking opportunities and having different ways to share work, opinions and ideas with others can help towards that direction. My online placement with Mindsets gave me the confidence to take on new roles – since finishing my placement I have started volunteering at a children's library and at a school library, became a CILIP School Libraries Group (SLG) committee member, and part of the MK LitFest steering group. I have also started attending a variety of conferences and book festivals (AllFlows Design and Tech conference, CILIP conference, MK LitFest, Bedford BookTastic children's festival etc), networking with other professionals, and targeting how I can expand my knowledge and skills.

Overall, I found OneHE Mindsets a welcoming and encouraging environment for my placement, and it provided me with increased confidence, new knowledge and skills, and more connections. Regular meetings were set up to go over what I was working on and provide guidance/support where necessary, but I was also given free rein to follow ideas and interests that I felt were relevant. E-mails as necessary were also utilised (from both ends). This felt like a really good balance of support and autonomy.

I enjoyed the wide range of activities I worked on, but particularly the research aspect of finding and fixing broken links, creating a document analysing the forum membership, sourcing free digital resources for a toolkit, and researching potential speakers. I also enjoyed the interactive parts, including the working party meetings with Mindsets and SALCTG (Scottish Academic Libraries Cooperative Training Group), engaging with the members and wider audiences via the forum and Twitter feed, assisting with live events, e-mailing students, and promoting events across multiple channels.

I would like to thank both the RGU course and the Mindsets teams. Working with the Mindsets community made me feel supported, and that my work, contributions, and ideas were valued. This was a truly positive experience.

*Helen Blackwell is currently undertaking the dissertation stage of a CILIP accredited master's programme in Information and Library Studies at Robert Gordon University. She is passionate about education and literacy. She is a CILIP School Libraries Group (SLG) committee member, volunteers at a*

*school library and a public children's library, is part of the MK LitFest steering group, and is a youth leader for St John Ambulance.*