



VET & BUSINESS  
PARTNERSHIP

## CASE STUDY | Northern Ireland

# Student Placement Management System.

'Business Engagement and Student Tracking  
System' - BEST

## INTRODUCTION

South Eastern Regional College (SERC) improves the employability of all students through its innovative 'Get the Edge' programme, enhancing technical, transferable and enterprise skills by enriching the student experience through developing problem solving, communication, team work and leadership skills, student competitions, student companies, industry projects and placement opportunities.

SERC's focus is to ensure all students are equipped to progress to further study or enter employment by gaining vital work experience. SERC realised the need for a greater emphasis on work-based learning to ensure students get relevant high quality industry experience to improve student employability and develop individuals beyond their specific study discipline.

The provision of short term unpaid placements directly contributes to employability, but also highlights the need for a flexible and accessible placement management process. Combined with the varied student populous and taking into consideration the age of the students and the duty of care for their safety on placements, means sourcing and managing placements are increasingly complex.

How could SERC meet these work-based challenges, implement procedures, centralise the learning records and promote a collaborative approach to work as 'one college one team'? SERC had to adopt a more business-like approach.

## BACKGROUND

Northern Ireland (NI) extends over 14,000Km<sup>2</sup> and has a population of 1.8 million. SERC is one of six NI Colleges of Higher Education (HE) and Further Education (FE) formed after 16 NI Institutes were amalgamated in August 2007. With over 36,000 enrolments per year across a vast range of academic and vocational disciplines and an annual turnover of £45 million, SERC delivers to NI through eight campuses with 900 staff.

SERC offers targeted and tailored work integrated learning opportunities to each student by securing high quality subject related placements through suitable companies to meet course stipulations. SERC also encourages students with no stipulated placements from all disciplines to be involved in placements, volunteering and student industry projects.

## CHALLENGES

The evolution of the NI education sector has seen SERC successfully navigate an increasingly complex work environment with diverse stakeholders and various funding stream restrictions. Staff face distinct, new challenges balancing both operational and strategic requirements. After the 2007 amalgamation, rationalisation and harmonising of the work-based provision through implementing procedures had been successful, however, staff were still not sharing information, greater internal collaboration was necessary.

Unlike University paid industrial placements which last a period of six or twelve months, FE College placements are stipulated by each course. Within this placement provision there are numerous modes of attendance and different placement duration lengths. These range from one academic year to one thirteen week block, or two six week blocks per year. Within the placement itself the placements hours can also vary greatly, from one day per week to as much as five days a week. In addition, particular courses such as Health and Child Care who have the greatest concentration of students, require at least four placements in their two-year course.

The management and supervision of these placements is a more demanding process, especially taking into consideration the age of the students and the duty of care with their health, safety and welfare on placement. The 16 – 19 age group is the highest percentage in SERC.

SERC not only has to manage this high volume of placement students, but the College's increasingly extensive links with businesses.

The need for a more professional business approach and a centralisation of the work-based learning records was necessary.

## SOLUTION

SERC researched software in an attempt to meet the challenges associated with managing an institution wide student work placement scheme, and given the College's success on other areas including Student Funding and Learning Support, this led to the internal programming development of a more integrated software solution which enforced business processes.

Programming to develop a placement management system commenced in March 2011 to streamline the placement procedure by providing a comprehensive solution built around established college placement processes. This was piloted throughout the latter part of 2011/2012 and further development saw the system evolve into the 'Business Engagement and Student Tracking System (BEST) replacing the CRM system in the college. BEST was designed as a single shared database where information and communication with external companies is stored and student placements are managed.

The system promotes internal collaboration and efficiency, and provides multi-site secure access to the three placement partners: students, college placement staff and Placement Providers (employers). Students can search and apply for placements and companies, college placement staff assign detailed placements to students, and Placement Providers have access to all information relevant to their placement student. The system generates placement documentation and evaluations for the three partners to complete and reports are produced.

# IMPACT AND OUTCOMES

## Key Features of the Placement System

- Records Higher and Further Education placements and work experience (shadowing)
- Implements a security model to control access to data
- Three Placement Partners all with secure access in line with Data Protection
- Accessible 24 hours a day 7 days a week online through the staff/student intranet and Placement Provider App
- Can be accessed remotely on mobile smart phone devices
- Students have access through a Single Sign On (SSO) and must agree to the placement system Terms and Conditions before use
- Students search and apply for placements/companies
- All evaluation documentation online – templates provided and edited to suit course and placement requirements
- Reports produced and a live status warning system in place
- Provides professional interaction with Placement Providers.

BEST offers the three placement partners access to the following information which has improved communication between staff, students and placement providers, and enhanced the health and safety of students on placement;

1. Students	2. SERC Staff	3. Employers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Online Forms; Health, Travel, CV</li> <li>■ Apply for placements, companies</li> <li>■ Access to over 9000 companies</li> <li>■ Online Evaluations</li> <li>■ Communication with SERC placement staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Manage student applications</li> <li>■ Evaluations on line</li> <li>■ Online Risk assessments</li> <li>■ Templates available</li> <li>■ Sharing company contacts</li> <li>■ Collaboration between campus and SERC</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Accessto; Studentand next of kin contact details,</li> <li>■ Health Declaration</li> <li>■ Placement description</li> <li>■ Risk assessment</li> <li>■ Online Evaluation forms</li> </ul>

The implementation of BEST has greatly improved communication, maximised staff resource utilisation and developed better time management practices. This has increased and enhanced the accessibility, planning, delivery and overall quality of the placement experience for all involved.

BEST is a key component of the College’s approach to increasing the employability of all its students and is a system with great potential to benefit both the education sector and wider industry.

Currently SERC manages 2250 students and apprentice/trainees per year.

## FUTURE STEPS / RECOMMENDATIONS

BEST, like any software system, is constantly evolving to facilitate new departments and partnerships. To accommodate this, programming was ongoing through the first two years since it was first trialled in July 2011. The College continues to work to further expand the system, facilitating a more efficient and professional combined approach to dealing with business clients and students on placement and in January 2016 SERC decided to initiate an upgrade version of BEST.

Staff input is vital for the BEST System's future development and use, the upgrade is based on user feedback and recommendations. Staff training in the use of the system continues to allow for the changes in staffing.

There have been obvious cost effective benefits with the BEST System for education institutions which have resulted in interest from Colleges and Universities.

## FURTHER READING

Read in conjunction with the case study:

- The case study 'BEST Functionality'