THE PLACEMENT
Kensington Interiors Ltd operates as interior design specialists and has grown steadily since its inception in 1999. Over this period, Director, Mr Tyrone Winter, has expanded its depth and breadth of expertise by forging a close partnership with leading specialists in cutting edge product, fabric design and furniture manufacture. The business is located in an affluent area of Belfast providing an interior design service to a range of commercial and residential clients.

On Mrs Deirdre Robson’s application to become involved in the EU Peace II, Proteus project, ‘Enabling Lecturers to Learn from Business’, she stated:

“As someone who has been cocooned for 19 years in the teaching profession I wish to take up the challenge in the application of my knowledge, skills and creativity in a business environment.”

Before becoming involved in the design side of the business, Deirdre was introduced to the routine of administration tasks and was allowed to view the client and company accounts. This experience led to a grasp of the nature of contract most likely to result in a profit.

During the second week of placement Deirdre returned to more familiar territory and was set the task to become familiar with the huge range of fabrics, paints, flooring and wall coverings available and currently in fashion. A true insight to the ‘real world of business’ was experienced when this task extended to checking out competitors’ products and prices which confirmed that Kensington Interiors know their market very well and generally set contract terms which result in repeat custom or ‘word-of-mouth’ recommendation leading to new business.

Meeting with clients was described by Deirdre as being “daunting” and very “fast moving” experience with item prices and contract estimates having to be prepared and confirmed at speed. This process was carried out without the luxury of being able to spend time double checking details, as is generally the case in the public sector.

Key experience was gained by Deirdre being allowed to become involved in the ‘Expo Exhibition’, Eco House project at the King’s Hall, Belfast. Kensington Interiors had been commissioned to supply the window dressings for the house.

Feedback from the company Director paid tribute to Deirdre’s knowledge of design resulting in her opinion at trade or client level being valued. He also mentioned, “Deirdre’s strength is her ability to talk to anyone and to get stuck in and carry out any task set.” As a point of humour, Tyrone also remarked how Deirdre was “too cheery first thing in the morning!” Direct praise was also given for how Deirdre had revolutionised the business in terms of using IT efficiently to support administration tasks. This was set apart from her knowledge of art and design which made a significant contribution to ongoing contracts.

KEY LEARNING POINTS ON BUSINESS
- An appreciation of the importance of credit control and the realisation that no small business is more than three months away from bankruptcy if contracts are not time managed and accounts kept up-to-date.
- An appreciation of the high level of dependency on confident communication skills by the owner when dealing with suppliers and customers. Deirdre admired the level of patience evident when dealing with customer demands and realised this virtue was core to a successful business.
• Work on the 'Eco House' resulted in Deirdre's services being requested by another company with which she had had some level of contact with during her placement. Due to this new working environment involving a number of companies working together on a common project, the realism of how 'ruthless' the world of business can become was revealed. Learning was beyond any textbook theory on team dynamics!

POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTION TO THE BA (Hons) LIBERAL ARTS DEGREE PROGRAMME OF THE UNIVERSITY

This placement experience raises questions regarding the methods of teaching and assessment used in our BA (Hons) Liberal Arts degree. Deirdre stated: “A substantial proportion of the BA (Hons) Liberal Arts degree is lecture based learning which is ideal for those who learn best through listening, reading books and writing assignments/exams. A high proportion of students entering the BA programme have not shown a predisposition to this style of learning in their earlier schooling, as reflected in examination entry grades. They may be more predisposed to visual, kinesthetic or interpersonal learning and are likely to possess a much wider range of intelligences than the literary intelligence which is the focus of academic teaching and learning. We should attempt a better match with the demands of the workplace and endeavour to encourage entrepreneurial qualities within both degree programmes offered at the college.”

FUTURE LINKS WITH BUSINESS

Ideas presented by Deirdre to generate new business for the company were well received and contact has been maintained to follow-up on the agreed action.

During the term of placement Deirdre was included in a visit to Dublin to source design ideas. This was a very productive alliance and has resulted in Deirdre being invited to accompany the company staff to the Paris Trade Show in January 2007.

PERSONAL LEARNING

Deirdre stated: “Release from School Experience made involvement in this project possible. I am grateful to college Senior Management who had the vision to realise that this opportunity would be a dynamic and valuable experience.”

Deirdre paid tribute to Tyrone as the working Director and David, now employee, but previously the owner of an antiques business, for creating a relaxing learning environment charged with motivation and ‘fun’. Having embarked on the placement wondering if she had much to contribute Deirdre has indicated surprise in the fact that businesses can learn from lecturers and considers that potential public/private sector alliances should be further explored.

Deirdre stated: “As an individual who came through the education system and then subsequently went to work in it, I had little sense of reality of life beyond the classroom. Now I am acutely aware of the risk the private sector takes to create wealth without the security of sick pay, a pension etc. They pay huge taxes which the public sector spends on a level of administration which is no longer sustainable by our economy.”