PrePlace: an online preparatory resource for students undertaking Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) in the workplace.

Helen Stephenson
Centre for University Teaching, Flinders University

Jody Hannah
Formerly, Centre for University Teaching, Flinders University

Preparing students prior to undertaking a Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) placement is the responsibility of the University and an important stepping stone in ensuring the placement is considered a success by all parties. To support staff and promote the preparation of students undertaking a placement at Flinders University, the Centre for University Teaching developed an interactive online student preparatory resource called PrePlace. Designed by a working group consisting of members from diverse areas of the University, PrePlace contains three modules covering important aspects concerning work-integrated learning placements. These include Occupational Health and Safety responsibilities and more general topics such as work-life balance, accepting and utilising feedback, and professional presentation and attitudes. Delivered online, from within the University’s learning online system, PrePlace is currently being utilised in Schools across the University. This paper details the rationale and processes undertaken in developing PrePlace, the subject matter incorporated into PrePlace, and outlines the aspirations of the working group to strategically manage (through student and staff evaluation) PrePlace’s effectiveness; subsequently guiding its future development and continued relevance.

Keywords: online resource, WIL resource, student preparation, OHS, WIL policy, PrePlace

Introduction

PrePlace was designed to be a student-focused resource that could be utilised by staff across the University regardless of discipline, to cover key administrative procedures and preparatory information prior to a student undertaking a work-integrated learning (WIL) placement. Administrative procedures include fitness for and withdrawal from placement policies, insurance, etc. This paper provides an overview of the stages undertaken in developing PrePlace, the role of the working group and its acceptance and use by a diverse range of disciplines.

WHY? The context of PrePlace and for WHOM?

WIL has existed within universities for decades; it is an established practice in professionally accredited degrees such as social work, nursing, medicine, engineering and teaching (Emslie, 2011, p. 35). WIL is increasingly being incorporated into all undergraduate degrees in response to calls for universities to provide work-ready graduates. These calls can be found in Government recommendations and directives, demands from industry, student demand, professional accreditation requirements/industry standards and international trends (Cooper, Orrell, & Bowden, 2010; Emslie; Patrick et al., 2008). At Flinders University (2010d) this is demonstrated in ‘the University’s aim of providing Work-Integrated Learning …activities for students in all courses’.

Facilitating WIL placements entails numerous administrative requirements (i.e. risk appraisals, placement allocations) to be undertaken with significant workload implications for university staff. At Flinders University key requirements are contained within the Work-Integrated Learning Policy, Guidelines for the Design of Work-Integrated Learning Topics and Administrative Procedures for Student Work-Integrated Learning Placements (Flinders University, 2010a, 2010c, 2010d).

Designed by a dedicated Working Group consisting of academic and general staff across disciplines and services, PrePlace provides guidance to students prior to commencing their WIL placement. Incorporating recommendations arising from Flinders University WIL practitioners (Flinders University: Centre for University Teaching, 2009), PrePlace is a student-focused resource that university staff may elect to utilise as a means of conveying information on administrative policies, professional skills and attitudes.

1 Centre for University Teaching, Flinders University, +61 8 8201 3828, helen.stephenson@flinders.edu.au.
WHAT? The content and rationale of PrePlace

PrePlace is designed to provide students with information leading to knowledge acquisition and the establishment of a firm foundation for participating in a successful WIL experience. Intended to be undertaken by students prior to commencing their WIL placement PrePlace utilises problem-solving tasks (videos and written case study scenarios) to assess its stated learning outcomes (see table 1). Two videos comprising advice from students and staff are incorporated within Module One (What advice would you give someone undertaking their first WIL placement?) and Module Three (A final word).

Table 1: PrePlace Structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Module</th>
<th>Information</th>
<th>Estimated Time (min)</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| One    | **Title: PrePlace Preparation**  
Learning Outcomes - students will be able to:  
- identify requirements that demonstrate fitness for placement*; and  
- identify specific conditions under which a student may be withdrawn  
*fitness for placement refers to mandatory requirements (eg. National Criminal History Checks) students must meet prior to undertaking placements.  
Content: Fitness for placement and withdrawal from placement | 20 minutes |
| Two    | **Title: Occupational Health and Safety (OHS)**  
Learning Outcomes - students will be able to:  
- identify their role and responsibilities in OHS while on WIL placement and at University;  
- identify OHS processes and equipment within a workplace; and  
- determine the correct process for reporting an injury while on WIL placement.  
Content: Working safely; self-reliance; workplace violence; and workplace injuries. | 30 minutes |
| Three  | **Title: Thriving on Placement**  
Learning Outcomes - students will be able to:  
- recognise a variety of issues that may occur while in a WIL placement; and  
- identify appropriate strategies to address these WIL related issues.  
Content: Organisational culture; preparing for your placement; work/life balance; and receiving and dealing with feedback. | 1 hour |

Recognising that students may undertake PrePlace over numerous visits, a tracking system identifies progress with pages marked ‘complete’ when students have viewed them and assessment grades are met. Assessment feedback is provided immediately after submission of the quiz, clarifying the goals of the task and providing guidance on further steps and considerations. Where a student receives a grade lower than the required pass mark they are able to retake the assessment task until the passing grade is obtained.

HOW? The design and delivery of PrePlace

A series of reviews (Flinders University, 2007, 2010b) provided quantitative and qualitative data on the scope of WIL placements being undertaken at Flinders University and identified a range of associated resourcing issues. Investigating these issues through WIL practitioner forums (2009 – present) determined the need to both refresh the successful 2003 WIL Online Practicum Preparation Program (OPP) and Teacher’s Guide, and develop and implement specific WIL policy and guidelines. ‘Extensive discussion’ (Flinders University: Centre for University Teaching, 2009) regarding the development of the WIL policy ensued (early 2009 – mid 2010); this discussion informed a simultaneous review of the WIL OPP. In addition, focused WIL OPP forums and consultation with the Centre for Educational Information Communication Technology (CEdICT) identified that the OPP should:

- utilise current media technologies;  
- be accessible to students through online delivery;  
  - be multi-disciplinary in its approach;  
  - be able to be completed within three hours (dependent on the number of assessment attempts required); and
incorporate elements of the Administrative Procedures for Student WIL Placements (Flinders University, 2010a).

To promote the likelihood that the revised OPP (now known as PrePlace) would be utilised within Flinders, it was important to ensure that it not only meet the needs of students but also the needs of WIL practitioners within the University. Ultimately, these WIL practitioners would determine whether PrePlace was embedded within their WIL topics and consequently utilised by students. Recognising that a previous attempt had stalled due to competing discipline expectations it was determined that a small but dynamic Working Group be formed. Formed in September 2010 this Working Group comprised a representative from each of the University’s four Faculties (three academics, one general) and a Project Leader from the Centre for University Teaching.

The Working Group met approximately every two weeks for an hour and a half throughout 2010, consulting with experts in specific areas on an as-needs basis. By the end of September a structure for PrePlace (incorporating the needs identified above) had been formed. PrePlace would be designed and delivered as follows:

- located within Flinders Learning Online (FLO);
- modular-based with learning outcomes and automated assessment;
- automated assessments would be predominately based on case study scenarios;
- minimum passing grades would be allocated to assessment tasks, however unlimited attempts permitted;
- automated assessment feedback would incorporate rationale, further information and - in the case of incorrect responses; directives assisting future attempts; and
- the limited budget (approximately $20,000) would be allocated to the production of a series of videos supporting key information.

By the end of 2010 the initial Working Group of five had indeed been dynamic having developed the first module, the production of five videos and an outline and approach to module two. In 2011 three of the original four Faculty members of the Working Group had withdrawn (one retired, one commenced a new appointment and one withdrew due to workload demands). New members were sought and the Working Group reinvented.

The 2011 Working Group comprised seven members including the original leader, academic staff from three of four Faculties and representatives from the International Student Services Unit, Occupational Health and Safety, and Health, Counselling and Disability Services. Meeting frequency was reduced and workloads reallocated, however the structure determined in 2010 remained with all but one exception; modules three and four would be amalgamated. The Working Group’s changed and increased membership, initially slowing progress, ultimately benefitted PrePlace’s development as member’s interactions within the University’s community raised awareness; promoting its implementation across the University.

In October 2011, FLO transitioned from WebCT to a Moodle platform. This enhanced technical capabilities, but also required reformatting of PrePlace content and assessment. A trial undertaken by WIL practitioners in November 2011 identified a number of concerns regarding navigation between pages and tasks, additional content inclusions (i.e. workplace violence) and expanded task feedback for the Working Group to consider. These concerns were addressed prior to PrePlace’s release in late February 2012.

PrePlace is accessible to students via a link listed in either their topic’s FLO site or their course/topic handbook. Students are able to view their grades while Staff have access to the entire grade-book to determine completion status.

WHERE are we at now?

PrePlace demonstrations continue to be undertaken across the University at Faculty and School level. New staff, with WIL practitioner responsibilities, are advised of PrePlace when attending the University’s mandatory Work-Integrated Learning Program (a compulsory program for all new staff involved in leading and organising WIL activities). After a four month break, the Working Group has resumed its meetings. A survey has been designed and ethics approval sought to enable qualitative and quantitative data collection from student and staff perspectives. The survey aims to identify improvements and their priorities, informing strategic planning and resource allocation. This will enable PrePlace’s continued refinement and relevance. In addition, further case
study scenarios are being designed to enable randomisation of assessment tasks for each learning outcome, and an index created.

PrePlace is currently being undertaken by students within the School of Computer Science, Engineering and Mathematics; School of Education, Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood and Disability Studies); Flinders Business School, School of Nursing and Tourism Department. Preliminary feedback, via verbal enquiries and unsolicited email, endorses PrePlace content.

Conclusion

PrePlace is a direct result of the efforts of a dedicated Working Group that seeks, listens and responds to feedback from staff and students. It ensures many of the direct student related administrative procedures, such as occupational health and safety, are consistently conveyed to students. PrePlace provides staff with a record of student completion, referencing the delivery of this information and evidence that it has been understood via the completed quiz results contained within the grade book. The Working Group continues to develop PrePlace and monitor and adapt it in response to feedback from students and staff, ensuring PrePlace remains relevant.

References


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