Will the bucket overflow? Maintaining WIL capacity in the face of increasing veterinary student numbers

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As employer expectations of practice-ready graduates increase and student numbers in higher education institutions grow, competition for work integrated learning (WIL) placements is becoming more intense. Accreditation bodies require veterinary schools to provide WIL opportunities for all students in both university-operated teaching hospitals and in external veterinary workplaces. With veterinary undergraduate student numbers increasing significantly in recent years, the sustainability of the current model of WIL has been a matter of vigorous debate, but there is a dearth of scholarly literature to inform such a debate. This paper reports on a survey of 300 veterinary employers purposively selected from a university database, with questions exploring motivations and barriers to their involvement in undergrad WIL and their perceptions on appropriate remuneration for their educational role. Survey findings suggest that despite the increasing numbers of veterinary students, the majority of veterinary employers were satisfied with their current student numbers, level of (usually non-financial) reward, and cited a desire to ‘put back to the profession’ as a significant driver for their involvement in WIL. By implication, capacity for WIL placements is not an inherent threat to sustainability of current models; instead of being an absolute value, capacity can be built or diminished. Universities would do well to invest in sustaining altruistic motivation and mutually beneficial relationships with their external partners.

Keywords: Work integrated learning, veterinary medical education, employer attitudes

INTRODUCTION

Increased competition for work integrated learning (WIL) placements is a feature of contemporary higher education, arising at the intersection of diverse phenomena including historically high undergraduate student numbers and continued demand from employers for workplace-ready graduates. The economic load involved with increased WIL is borne by workplaces and students, as well as by universities, a factor of considerable interest and controversy in a variety of disciplines. This paper reports on data from the questionnaire component of a mixed-methods study exploring veterinary employers’ involvement in undergraduate clinical WIL.

WIL IN VETERINARY EDUCATION

The veterinary profession offers an example of a discipline in which WIL has a long historical tradition in diverse workplace settings, following the still dominant Flexnerian model of medical education (Cooke, Irby, & O’Brien, 2010). Universities have been required to, and the majority still do, own and operate veterinary teaching hospitals. In the United Kingdom and its former colonies (including Australia) an additional less formal program of WIL in external veterinary practices, termed extra-mural studies (from the Latin ‘outside the walls’) is a requirement for accreditation (Australian Veterinary Boards Council, 2010; British Veterinary Association, 2009). More recently, models of distributed education have seen privately owned veterinary businesses designated as teaching hospitals in their field of expertise (Abbott, 2009; Fuentealba, Mason, & Johnston, 2008).

In the decade from 2004-2014, three new veterinary schools have been established in Australia and existing schools have expanded student numbers. Concern has been expressed over the capacity and sustainability of current models of WIL involving private veterinary practitioners. The Council of Veterinary Deans of Australia and New Zealand, in arguing that veterinary education in Australia is structurally underfunded, suggested that ‘there is growing pressure from all veterinarians…for compensation for the high costs of supervision and opportunity and material costs imposed by training students in a practice setting (2011, p. 4).’ A recent opinion piece in the professional literature claimed
that veterinary businesses are subsidising undergraduate education by $20 million per month, calculated at $250 per hour for student teaching (Smyth, 2013). The veterinary scholarly literature to date focuses on student perspectives of WIL (Baguley, 2006; Schull, Morton, Coleman & Mills, 2011) with a dearth of literature reporting practitioner perspectives on WIL. Particularly in times of increasing fiscal pressure on universities and students, consideration of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators of practitioner support for WIL is timely.

The activities of WIL can sit uneasily alongside university-based learning, a tension that has been noted in terms of metaphors for learning; learning as acquisition, learning as participation, and learning as becoming (Hager & Hodkinson, 2011; Sfard, 1998). Professional education benefits from the capacity to think flexibly in terms of more than one metaphor. Formal educational activities privilege the acquisition metaphor, with its emphasis on the teacher-learner relationship and on learning as an individual cognitive process (Hager, 2005; Sfard, 1998). WIL may be more fruitfully considered as a complex social process of participation in a professional practice, with both individual and extra-individual dimensions (Billett, 2009; Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008; Scholz, Trede, & Raidal, 2013). Undergraduate students are involved in coming to understand what it is to be a professional practitioner through participation in many instances and settings of practice (Billett, 2004; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

METHODS

The current study was undertaken to assess practitioner perspectives on factors that support sustainable participation in WIL. The School of Animal and Veterinary Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee approved the project as a minimal risk study (approval number 416/2013/09). A questionnaire was developed through a process of iterative review by the researchers, and piloted by a colleague with experience in both private veterinary practice and academic clinical education. The questionnaire was distributed by email (www.surveymonkey.com) to all practitioners on the WIL database of the authors’ institution following modifications on the basis of feedback from the pilot. Selection of participants who are engaged with undergraduate WIL represented both a convenient and purposive sample, as we believe the perspectives of those already involved in WIL are of high value (Creswell, 2009), and these practices are key to maintaining capacity for WIL. It was considered likely (and demonstrated by participant data) that practitioners thus recruited would be involved in WIL for multiple universities. Follow-up e-mails were sent 4, 7 and 18 weeks following the initial distribution; incentive to respond was provided by an optional opportunity to provide contact details to enter a draw for a small prize.

The questionnaire sought information on practice location, size and caseload, as well as the number of students hosted in the last year from Australian and international universities. Respondents were then presented with a series of statements associated with WIL, including motivations, benefits and challenges, with Likert-type responses and space for free-text comments. Data was downloaded from the online survey tool to Microsoft Excel, and descriptive statistics were derived. Free text comments were read by three of the researchers and were thematically analysed using a general inductive approach for qualitative data (Thomas, 2006). Particular care was taken to seek responses that raised themes not apparent elsewhere in the survey responses.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Of 369 questionnaires distributed, 142 valid responses were received (response rate 38.5%). Demographic information from respondents is summarised in Table 1.
TABLE 1 Workplace characteristics of survey respondents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice size (n=142)</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-2</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-4</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>38.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-7</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>21.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;8</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location (n=143)</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Town, population &lt;2000</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town, population 2100-10000</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>30.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town, 10100-30000</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>21.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional city</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>20.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan city</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Given that the population surveyed was derived from a database of practices hosting students, not surprisingly almost all workplaces had hosted students in the previous year. The estimated number of students ranged from 0-100, with a median of eight students. Of 134 responses, 109 (81.3%) had hosted between 1 and 20 students in the year, and 7 (5%) had hosted more than 50. Respondents were extremely aware of the importance of students having access to WIL outside university teaching hospitals, with the overwhelming majority ranking it as very important (82.3%, n=107) or important (15.4%, n=20). Only 1.5% (n=2) gave a neutral response and none disagreed. The majority of respondents (70%, n=94) reported no preference for students from specific institutions and most (76.5%, n=101) believed that the number of students they host per year is about the right number. A smaller number (20.5%, n=27) expressed a wish for more students, and only 3% (n=4) reported that fewer would be preferable. This finding suggests that responding workplaces are generally able to regulate student load to their satisfaction, and does not support notions that there is an impending crisis in short-term WIL capacity if undergraduate student numbers and workplace learning requirements are maintained at current levels.

The majority (n=74, 56.92%) of respondents indicated that they did not think payment for WIL was required. A smaller percentage (n=30, 23.08%) thought payment was appropriate, and 20.00% (n= 26) were uncertain as to whether practices should be paid for involvement in undergraduate WIL. Motivations for involvement in WIL were further explored by nominated responses (Table 2) and open-ended questions. The majority of respondents (83.6%, n=107) indicated that WIL was viewed as an opportunity to ‘put back’ into the profession. This consideration was reinforced by qualitative comments reflecting the experience they had been afforded as students:

All vets must not forget that our own professional education required experienced vets taking the time to help us gain confidence and competence. I feel strongly that we must give our time to the next crop of vets and should do so willingly and for free.

This philanthropic and pragmatic disposition to ‘pay forward’ the debt incurred from mentors and teachers during their own professional development, and to contribute to the growth and development of the next generation, reflects similar perspectives reported in the medical literature (Pichlhöfer, Tönies, Spiegel, Wilhelm-Mitterräcker, & Maier, 2013; Shannon et al., 2006). However, unlike medicine, where ethical codes urge doctors to “honor your obligation to pass on your professional knowledge and skills to colleagues and students (Australian Medical Association, 2006),” no such explicit undertaking to nurture subsequent generations has to date been formally endorsed by the veterinary profession.
As evident in Table 2, more pragmatic benefits, such as access to a supply of potential employees (66.4%, n= 85) and the help of an extra pair of hands (42.2%, n=54), were also recognised as deriving from participation in WIL. At the same time, a significant number of respondents cited benefits to their practice such as access to new knowledge, ability of students to research cases, opportunities for closer relationships with universities and the fact that the presence of students can challenge (positively) their practice:

By demonstrating our knowledge and encouraging the student’s input we have to justify our thought processes and decision-making skills, this keeps us honest.

Such responses articulate social and cultural motivations, and suggest that not only can workplaces offer opportunities for development and benefit for students, but that advantages can also flow in the opposite direction, that is from the student to the workplace.

The most frequent challenge cited by employers (79.8%, n=91) was the time penalty involved in having students in the workplace, and 28.9% (n=34) found the paperwork to be burdensome. Social factors, such as difficulty with getting along with some students (54.4%, n=64) were also of importance. Fewer than 25% of respondents cited factors such as upsetting clients and staff, cost, assessment responsibilities or feeling taken for granted by universities as drawbacks to involvement in WIL. A number of free comments related to the negative effect of hosting students who were not interested and enthusiastic:

The biggest problems are students with no interest in our work, which decreases our vets’ interest in teaching; in future other students suffer based on this experience.

The data relating to the challenges involved in student teaching, when explored alongside the responses relating to rewards (actual or desired) provided interesting illumination of the tensions and complexities that form part of the university/student/workplace relationship. Only 51% (n= 65) of respondents reported satisfaction with the support they received from the authors’ institution in providing WIL for students, and 56%(n= 71) perceived that the universities valued their involvement. Some comments suggested a sense that, in an era of higher education funding constraint, veterinary employers believe that universities are cost shifting onto private veterinary businesses:

For some courses Universities are being paid for the student place while the student is in a private practice and yet there is no follow through to the clinics. While a payment method may be hard, allowing access to the university online library journals etc may be a good way to provide benefit to clinics hosting students, and also possibly access to CPD provided by University free of charge for say one staff member per student/ time period.

The current study has limitations, such as a small sample size derived from the database of one university, and the omission of input from veterinary employers who choose not to be involved in WIL. Purposive sampling of practitioners currently involved in WIL may introduce bias, as differences have been identified between community-based preceptors actively engaged in medical education compared
to those who were no longer participating in medical student placements (Ryan, Vanderbilt, Lewis, & Madden, 2013). However, while not claiming to be generalisable to the veterinary profession as a whole, nor directly transferable to other disciplines, we believe that valuable insights have emerged.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study suggest that, for veterinary employers, involvement in undergraduate WIL is embedded in their professional practice, and so has social, cultural and material/economic dimensions (Kemmis, 2011). There are potential rewards and challenges in all of those dimensions, which are experienced in particular ways in different practice settings at specific times. WIL programs involve students, workplaces and the university in complex interdependent relationships.

There is unlikely to be a turnaround in the demand for WIL in workplaces external to universities and our findings suggest that employers would not favour such a move. Fostering and sustaining mutually rewarding relationships between students, universities and workplaces as partners in professional education requires balancing of interests and priorities that may be in tension. The ethical imperative that provides an intrinsic motivation for practitioners to teach should not be taken for granted. The economic dimension remains an important part of human social life, and of veterinary practice. However bringing the dimensions beyond the economic into focus aligns with the interests of employers and provides rich opportunities for creative and innovative thinking about relationships between academic institutions and the practising profession.

REFERENCES


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