

CARRICK INSTITUTE : DISCIPLINE BASED INITIATIVES



Work Integrated Learning : A national framework for initiatives to support best practice

Flinders University

John Harris
 Manager: Teaching Experience Programs
 Flinders University
 South Australia

Phone: +61 8 8201 3330
 Email: John.Harris@flinders.edu.au



Vignette title and details	Trends in Work Integrated Learning A university-wide investigation into the trends in various faculties and schools at Flinders University regarding Work Integrated Learning (WIL).
Discipline	Multi disciplinary
Employment sector	Multi-Sector
Student numbers	5,604
Optional/compulsory	Students in most disciplines are required to complete a prescribed amount of Work Integrated Learning as a component of their degree and for either registration or accreditation with an appropriate professional organisation.
Credit bearing	Yes.
Assessment	In most cases, students are either required to submit a journal or are formally supervised and provided with a written report which may be used in an application for employment.
Payment	Engineering students may be paid up to 66% of a graduate annual income on a pro-rata basis for the period of the placement. All other students are not paid and, in fact, may incur considerable debt and in some cases, financial hardship, as a result of the WIL placement. A limited number of scholarships are provided to assist with rural and remote placements. Some placement providers are paid a nominal amount for supervising a student on placement.
Number of staff involved	The Practicum Audit identified 221 academic staff involved with the coordination, management, supervision and teaching of practicum programs in 2006, supported by a further 39 staff

	with academic status, 73 general administration staff and more than 300 part time sessional or clinical supervision staff to assist with supervision and liaison between the university and the various agencies.
Weblink	http://www.flinders.edu.au/teach/t4l/practicum/resources/pdf/practicum_audit_report_07.pdf
Key Words	Work Integrated Learning; Partnerships; Industry Placement; Peer Mentoring; Parliamentary Internship

Overview

In November 2006, the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) and the Director, Academic Development Human Resources Division, commissioned a new audit of all practicum, work integrated learning, field experience, work-based learning or work experience in industry programs, to ascertain the degree to which recommendation for future directions, as determined in 1999, had been achieved and the impact of recent Federal Government legislation on those programs. The Practicum Audit collected data during January – March 2007, for 2006 practicum programs from all faculties and divisions of Flinders University, using an on-line questionnaire developed by the university's Flexible Delivery unit.

Special features

The Practicum Audit identified a number of key issues related to work experience. Of concern were the different practices adopted by each program. For example, in relation to pre-work place briefings, some programs run a series of lectures to support students and provide information that will assist them once they are in a placement, a few programs just run a one-off briefing session and several program have no briefing or information for students prior to them undertaking a work placement. This variance was also evident in the role that is played by the workplace supervisor. Some programs have the workplace supervisor playing a supervisory role, some are responsible for providing one-off or ongoing feedback, some programs require the workplace supervisor to act as a mentor, while others require the workplace supervisor to assess the student against a number of criteria. Not all workplace supervisors are required to write a report on each student. The greatest concerns for those who completed the audit were: the need to provide visible university support for work placements; the need to work closely with workplace supervisors to ensure the best experience for students and the associated difficulties of getting workplace supervisors together; the problem of getting the best feedback for students in relation to skills demonstrated while on the work placement; meeting accommodation costs in rural areas and managing the placement process for large numbers of students.

Finding placements was identified as one of the greatest issue of concern for university-based coordinators.

In spite of the issues identified above, there were a number of good models of practice identified through the audit.

One example is The Inspire Peer Mentor Program, now in its fourth year of operation and which provides student mentors to schools. The INSPIRE Peer Mentoring program has demonstrated that ways of working with teachers in both primary and secondary schools to overcome difficulties associated with trainee teacher placements in schools can be achieved. The INSPIRE Peer Mentoring program, administered by the Careers & Employment Liaison Centre, is a model of university to community engagement within formal and alternative learning environments in low socio-economic areas.

Another good practice model is The Parliamentary Internship Program which is in its sixth year of operation. It offers 36 students an opportunity to become an Intern, working in the South Australian Parliament for one semester. Students work with a Parliamentary Supervisor, usually a Member of Parliament, on the basis of a mutually agreed interest in a policy issue. The formal task is research for a Research Report of 6000 words on a policy issue. Many students have made career decisions on the basis of their Internship experience. Reports become part of the public record, and are part of the collection of the Parliamentary Library, after the assessment procedure. The Members of Parliament are also able to use the Reports in their professional activities.

In the area of teacher education, Flinders University has an especially close and well regarded relationship with schools and their staff in both the Government and Non-Government sectors in South Australia. An initiative of the

School of Education has been to develop over the past four years a network of "University Liaison" personnel throughout South Australia. University Liaison personnel attend Professional Learning workshops at Flinders University to gain firsthand knowledge of university policies and visit schools on a regular basis at times when trainee teachers are in the schools during their teaching practicum. Responses from schools clearly indicate a very high level of satisfaction with this direct form of liaison with the university and teachers value the opportunity to work closely with university personnel. There is a clear indication from teachers that they place a high value on their own role in the training of future teachers. Many teachers see their role as a "mentor" and are especially supportive of the trainee teacher program. Difficulties arise, however, in the implementation of trainee teacher programs, when a combination of an ageing teaching force, increasing teacher workloads, greater community demands and the closing of schools, reduces the number of places available in schools for trainee teachers.

A worrying trend is highlighted in the House of Representatives Report on the inquiry into teacher education, which, in its report *Top of the Class*, noted that: *While universities are required to provide practicum placements for their students, there is no obligation on employing authorities or schools to offer places. In the absence of obligation, universities must rely on the goodwill of schools and individual teachers. And, Teachers who supervise practicum students generally do not receive any form of accreditation or formal recognition for taking on the responsibility.*

The Chief Executive Officer of the Rural Education Forum of Australia (REFA) identified cost constraints of undertaking practicum in rural and remote placements. Not only do teaching students need to seek country placements, as the majority of job opportunities for graduates are in country locations, but also a significant number of Nursing & Midwifery students and Hospitality graduates are placed in rural and remote areas of Australia. The research done by REFA shows that there are five main costs to be met by students who take a country placement. They are the cost of travel to and from a placement, the cost of accommodation and any extras while away from home, the cost of maintaining their home base, the cost of getting prepared for a placement and loss of income because of not being able to maintain a paid job.

The Flinders University WorkReady Internship Program is an especially successful program providing opportunities for some 450 students each year to undertake a range of projects for business, industry and government with leading companies, law and accounting firms, environmental agencies, government departments, councils and community organisations. WorkReady placements operate throughout the year and the placement period is flexible depending on the organisation's needs and available resources.

In order to qualify as a lawyer in Australia, each law graduate must complete a recognised practical qualification. Upon completion of a recognised and accredited course of Practical Legal Training, potential lawyers must apply to the Supreme Court of the state in which they wish to practise for admission as a legal practitioner.

Many law firms and other legal offices prefer to have students on Placement on a full time basis. This creates several difficulties for many students. Some mature age students have children and find attending a Placement full time extremely difficult. Many cannot afford to pay for child care during this time and many students are not financially independent and have to work to survive, pay their rent/mortgage and put food on the table for themselves and their families. Students are often keen to secure a Placement in a legal office where they would ultimately like to work. However, it is of concern that this component of the practicum is sometimes seen as little more than a six-week job interview, with an emphasis on potential permanent future employment overshadowing the learning of important practical legal skills.

Student feedback about placements is, in the main, extremely positive. Comments like: *This was the best part of the whole program* are common. Students get very excited about working in a real team, in a real office with real clients, in a hospital with real patients, or in a school with real students. The challenges and pressures of professional practice are usually met with nervous excitement.

The overall strength of Flinders University Work Integrated Learning programs is a reflection of the growing commitment by institutions and businesses to continue to improve the quality of the practicum experience provided for students and to work closely with university personnel.

Future work

The deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) has initiated a series of WIL forums to further discuss issues arising from the report and to act on the recommendations contained in the Practicum Audit 2007 report.