

# **Rolling Our Sleeves Up! Developing New Opportunities for Credit-bearing Work Placements**

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## **Abstract**

For a number of years the Bay of Plenty Polytechnic has sought to work with employers to provide a variety of workplace options within its programs. These have ranged from a few days of work experience with no credit weighting, through to internships of many months' duration which carry significant credit. A mid 2005 audit of work placements identified a variety of processes in place which required different levels of sign-off and response by employers. Consequently it was felt that the development of some consistent documentation would be beneficial both to the student and the employer, as well as reducing any risk for the institution. With the assistance of a grant from the ITP Business Links fund in 2005, an initial analysis of all programs was carried out to simply identify those which had some type of work experience component and those which did not. From this initial list a second more in-depth investigation took place, focusing on those programs without any work placement or work experience of any kind. Simultaneously, we reviewed programs which had some work placement but for which no credit was earned. Data was gathered from interviews with teaching staff, as well as those involved in academic development. Six existing programs and a further five new programs which are currently under development were identified as being eminently suitable. An additional three programs which possibly showed potential for the inclusion of internships were omitted from the study when this initiative appeared not to be supported by the staff delivering those programs. The next phase of development commencing early in 2006 will be developing the work placement courses and appropriate assessments for incorporation as program changes for 2007. The purpose of this paper is to share the Bay of Plenty Polytechnic's experience in seeking out new opportunities for the inclusion of credit bearing work experience, explaining the methodology used, with identification of best practice, and a review of some of the literature available, particularly relating to non-degree settings.

## **Introduction**

The changing need of higher education to interface more effectively with the community has been widely documented, as has the rising awareness of those attributes which most benefit graduates seeking employment (Hodges & Burchell, 2003; Victoria University Wellington, 2000). Students today need skills for lifelong learning: information literacy; problem solving and critical thinking; the ability to work autonomously, alone and in groups. Reported 'information deficits', where students know about specific subjects, but not necessarily how to operate in a working environment, highlight the need for tertiary education, through its curricula, to foster this transition (Harvard, Hughes & Clarke, 1998).

A key way in which institutions can build stronger partnerships with employers, and assist their students in post-graduate success, is through the provision of internship, practicum and fieldwork experiences. Such meaningful experiences not only allow the student to connect theory with practice, they also introduce a variety of perspectives. Projects and problems can be viewed through community and multicultural lens, as well as their own individual perceptions (Implementing and assessing internships, 2005). Work placement modules in higher education programs, therefore, are increasingly regarded as a tool to reinforce understanding and identify potential applications of learning in the world of work (Jackson, 1995).

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When the Tertiary Education Commission, acting on behalf of the Government, provided funding for Industry Training Providers (ITPs) to demonstrate better linkages with industry and businesses, we identified the inclusion of workplace learning into more of our programs as one opportunity for staff and students to interact better with businesses. This led to a project to identify those programs that currently do not have any workplace learning taking place, and then, to create such opportunities within the existing curriculum without adding additional courses. The outworking of this will become more apparent in the description of the findings later in this paper, and in the implementation that is now taking place. In conducting interviews with some staff as part of the second phase of the research, some models of good practice were also identified and will be described in the final section.

## Literature Review

### *Scope*

This small literature review is by no means an exhaustive collation of the scholarship around the topic. Rather, the intention is to overview key concepts, interpretations and initiatives from national and international articles and reports that represent a number of different fields, both vocational and professional.

### *Definition of Terminology*

This report uses the term ‘work placements’ as a generic description of a period of time within a study program spent in an organizational environment, rather than the classroom. The actual work completed will vary from daily professional practice to one-off projects, research, or the performance of tasks directed to achieve set learning outcomes. However, within the literature, there are a number of different terms used, sometimes around very similar conceptualizations.

A study from Ontario, Canada, notes that secondary school boards must provide school-work transition programs, developed in cooperation with local employers, for all students who are intending to enter the work force directly after graduating. Different types of arrangements are utilized: ‘Job shadowing’ allows students to spend time with, and observe, an employee in the workplace; ‘Work experience’ is a short-term, subject-related placement around a learning activity; and ‘cooperative education’ allows students to earn additional credits through an individualized learning plan based on job-specific expectations (Cooperative Education, n.d.).

‘Apprenticeship’, according to Clarke and Winch (2004), refers to vocational learning that is based in the workplace, with the student spending a portion of time in education through a system of block release. The student is very much an organizational trainee, and is paid a salary as determined by the national body responsible for the curriculum. Apprenticeships are often described as ‘front-loaded’ or ‘front-end’ referring to a period of formal education and/or training that needs to be completed by entrants to an occupation before they can be regarded as qualified workers (Hager, 2004). Some American writers discuss similar scenarios as ‘cooperative education’, in this context, typified by work experiences of whatever duration, where students are paid (Implementing and Assessing Internships, 2002). A different type of experiential learning is sponsored by colleges, polytechnics and institutes of technology, and universities – rather than industry. ‘Internships’, sometimes referred to as a ‘practicum’, are, according to an American report drawing on the experiences of three different tertiary settings, “structured and supervised professional experiences in an approved organization or agency where students can earn academic credit upon completion of the experience (Inkster & Ross, cited in Implementing and Assessing Internships, 2002, p. 67). The ‘supervisor’ may be from faculty, the organization, or an expert sourced externally.

‘Residency’ is generally used to describe a more distantly monitored period of professional practice, quite commonly one to two years, where the graduate is fully employed, but subject to a final evaluation before eligible for registration as an autonomous member of a national body. Residents are often overseen by a senior colleague who acts as a ‘mentor’. Qualification structures which progress through classroom training to internships and finally, residency are well established in the fields of education and medicine.

### *Work Placements: The Rationale*

There is a widespread consensus in the literature that just knowing applicable theory is not enough: students must know when and how the theory is to be applied (see, e.g., Clarke & Winch, 2004). Such a distinction is just one difference between the culture of learning and the culture of work. Typically students get regular feedback about their performance, their programs are highly structured with a great deal of direction, and they have flexible schedules with few major changes. Students get frequent breaks and time off, and the focus is very much on their own development and individual efforts. Life in the workforce can often be diametrically opposed (Implementing and Assessing Internships, 2002). Clearly it is advantageous to students to encounter this different culture before embarking on a career in their chosen field, so that this life-experience becomes the most elemental justification for the inclusion of work placement within an academic program.

It is further suggested that the more self-directed learning which becomes possible outside of the classroom encourages students to find creative responses to situations, rather than relying on the stereotypic or patterned responses that classroom role-plays and simulations often generate (Regehr et al., 2002). A third benefit claimed for work placement is that it emphasizes “mutuality in the teacher / student relationship as a way of enhancing the inherent capacities of students” (Regehr et al., 2002, p. 55). Such participatory learning extends the educational experience and provides the student with a model for working in teams, project management and ongoing professional development.

Students are generally expected to share in the process of defining practicum goals and evaluating their progress towards these goals: work placements which encourage the student to self-assess, rather than to assume the passive role of being assessed as occurs in most institutional settings, are therefore a critical step.

Another justification for workplace experience is that it gives students a perceived edge in the job market (Implementing and Assessing Internships, 2002). Dickson (1995) found that work placement provided access to informal employer/community networks thereby enhancing employment openings. By learning firsthand what employers want, enhancing their communication skills, observing real-world politics in the workplace and clarifying their career direction, students are far more likely to achieve first preference positions than if they had arrived at the interview with no industry exposure.

In addition to the above benefits for students and potential employers of programs that produce ‘fit for purpose’ graduates, there is also a significant advantage for the education providers. By generating networks, links and partnerships with private and public sector organizations, institutions embed a culture of two-way sharing of knowledge and expertise (Green, 2005). Industry can inform policy, and institutional responsiveness can ensure a status of first-choice provider. Staff are also rewarded, as engagement with industry offers the opportunity to develop new skills that may open new research and professional development opportunities. Further, entrepreneurial activity in the tertiary education organization is likely to receive enhanced levels of external support.

### *Traditional and More Recent Contexts*

Traditionally, the pattern of progression from student to professional, centering on work placement that moves from observation, to practicum/internship to registration, has been seen as the foundation for medical and teacher training professions, responsible for the health and intellectual vigor of the nation. Claims in common are well qualified workers, prepared for the rigors of a demanding and highly accountable workplace, with a commitment to professional development and reflective practice (Morgan, 1999).

Over the last two decades or so, other professions have followed suit. The field practicum is now seen as central to the education of social work students, in order to “integrate knowledge, values and skills into their professional self-concepts...[and so] to become autonomous, self-directed, self-regulating professionals” (Regehr, Regehr, Leeson & Fusco, 2002, p. 56). Rompelman and De Vries (2002) note that “in many engineering curricula a period of practical training in industry is either compulsory or advised,” which many universities prefer to see occur offshore (p. 173). They argue

that this serves not only the educational agenda of learning to put knowledge and skills into practice, but also the objective of the 'internationalization' of engineering education.

Whether in response to issues of internationalization, or professionalism, a brief Internet search identifies a host of reports of new initiatives trialing work placements in a range of fields. A Belgian university finds a three-month internship invaluable for teaching final year pharmacy students over-the-counter medication (Leemans, Verstraeten, Zwaenepoel & Laekeman, 2003). The University of Wisconsin monitored psychology students who administered a 10-week reading intervention and behavior modification program to children with learning disorders and found that students benefited from both "pedagogical and service-oriented perspectives" (Weiss, 2004, p. 43). Business studies and accounting undergraduates in the United Kingdom demonstrated a higher level of reflective capacity after work placement, with a direct relation to academic performance (Lucas & Tan, n.d.).

### *Variations in Implementation*

The dynamics of an internship, it has been argued, follow directly from the epistemological assumptions of the educational designers (Implementing and Assessing Internships, 2002). With an objectivist perspective, where professional knowledge is viewed as facts, rules and procedures applied universally to problems, the internship is a form of technical training. Instructors or supervisors observe students and seek primarily to direct correct responses. Yet a constructivist approach looks to also address students' intellectual development. This view, with supervisors who act as coaches, draws on multiple ways of knowing, so that students construct and experiment with different strategies for problem-solving, and move towards integrative knowledge that fosters lifelong learning and can respond to a constantly changing environment. The focus of the work placement, therefore, will need to be aligned with, and appropriate to the program and the field within which it occurs.

An associated line of inquiry in the literature looks at the type of self-assessment and supervisor assessment that are conducted around learning goals and professional practice. With the move to individualized learning contracts in many practicums, student performance cannot be easily compared to an ideal standard or a mythical student norm. Rather, an alternative conceptualization suggests that it is more important for an individual to be able to identify areas where he/she is relatively effective and those where performance is less sound. Regehr et al. (2002) suggest that the question students should ask is not 'How good am I?', but rather 'What aspects of my professional performance require the most work?'

This type of questioning has direct implications for the assessment tool(s) employed. Self-directed learning, one of the tenets of adult education, is widely linked to work placements, as students negotiate their own learning projects, contracts and goals. Some authorities feel that this is unarguable: "Nowhere is self-directed learning more essential than in the professions, whose self-regulating autonomy is based on the competent exercise of self-assessment" (Regehr et al., 2002, p. 60). Yet there are two key flaws here: the first is the veracity of such assessment. One study of examination skills in medical students found that students consistently rated themselves and their peers much higher than faculty members did. The second weakness lies in the inherent tension between the supervisor's need to promote and value a student's capacity for critical self-appraisal, while ultimately holding the final responsibility for deciding whether the student has met the placement requirements (Regehr et al., 2002).

One way around this is for programs to develop a range of assessment approaches. Some assess the learning contract itself; others ask students to write regularly in reflective journals, or to submit weekly reports documenting specific activities or accomplishments. Some students keep critical incident logs, some are evaluated on participation in group conferences, and most complete final reports that summarize the overall experience and critique their own performance. Portfolios, with a collection of materials that students have created throughout their internship, are also used widely. And explicitly, or tacitly assumed, 'triadic' assessment, where student, tutor and supervisor all have a voice, is virtually ubiquitous (Ortlipp, 2003).

By collecting such longitudinal, contextual and collaborative information (Implementing and Assessing Internships, 2002) in a variety of ways and from a range of sources, potential issues of

discourse, subjectivity and power (Ortlipp, 2003) are at least partially addressed. A final critical factor in the process is that of moderation. This means of quality assurance must be a continuous process to ensure that students are being assessed in a consistent, accurate and well-designed manner. Further, these issues of equivalency and equity must apply at a local institutional and national qualifications framework level (Sacht, n.d.).

A final variation in work placement design and assessment to be considered here is the role of online learning. Web-based facilities such as Blackboard™ make it possible for students to retrieve handouts and enquiries and to create a discussion forum, no matter how distant their location from the home campus. In theory, students should be able to receive regular feedback, pursue their interests and take responsibility for their education and their professional life. However, results from studies about the efficacy of such services indicate that often, students do not use the program intensively to support and monitor their progress (Leemans et al., 2003). The researchers postulate that this may be because students have insufficient computing skills, are not familiar with the software, lack access to the Internet, or do not see the importance of participation unless they are being graded. Clearly these issues require consideration prior to the implementing of any such application.

### *Generic Requirements*

Underpinning support and student readiness for a virtual learning environment is a relatively specific issue for an institution to consider prior to introducing technology-dependant work placement programs. There are also a range of more generic requirements. Chickering and Gamson (1991, cited in *Implementing and Assessing Internships*, 2002), maintain that high quality internships must follow or adhere to the seven principles of good practice:

They encourage contact between faculty and students as well as develop cooperation among students. Students are exposed to numerous active learning techniques and receive prompt, ongoing feedback about their performance. Students spend specific allocated times on their multiple tasks as they strive to achieve high expectations. Finally, internships help students learn to respect diverse talents and ways of learning (p. 67).

In order to provide the context for such practice, Green (2005) lists a number of prerequisites within institutional culture. He argues that tertiary education organizations can use the TEC GIPI (Growth & Innovation Pilot Initiatives) program development package to build capability to work with business and deliver economic benefits - simultaneously providing work experience opportunities for students - provided they:

- Maintain teaching and research in areas of strength - whilst maintaining relevance
- allow flexible teaching arrangements to create opportunities for developing new programs
- encourage staff who are interested in entrepreneurial activity
- demonstrate long term commitment and vision
- fulfill obligations that come with consultancy (including recognizing the impact of commercial confidentiality issues on academics' own research), and
- ensure knowledge sharing is challenging

### *Barriers*

Following the requirements noted above, Green's (2005) list of impediments to implementation of collaborative programs between education and industry is consistent:

- A lack of institutional commitment and resources to engage with industry partners
- poorly-resourced research offices
- lack of long term strategic commitment to areas of strength
- entrenched conservatism in teaching arrangements
- lack of personal/institutional reward in PBRF environment
- lack of expertise and resources to handle intellectual property, and
- no opportunity for staff to learn entrepreneurship skills

While these are practical issues, there are also conceptual arguments around different types of work placement provision. Work-based training may no longer be 'in-synch' with the concept of an 'occupation' in the changing world of twenty-first-century work. Clarke and Winch (2004) argue the need for broader skills and knowledge that are transferable across jobs and sites, and are the realm of formal education. Clearly there are advantages to both types of learning, and despite continuing debate, and "vocational preparation needs an integration of the two" (Hager, 2004, p. 527).

Assessment can also be problematic: Morgan (1999) notes the move away from checklists to performance assessment instruments that require collaboration, investigation, and emphasize multiple strategies and integrated knowledge and processes. They must be relevant, have topic currency and above all, tap higher order thinking skills. Within this, issues of tutor/supervisor final responsibility and subjectivity, student voice, benchmarking and the establishing of common standards must also be addressed.

### *Summary*

Despite the need to consider a host of practical, political, philosophical and theoretical issues around the design of work placement opportunities for tertiary students, there is widespread enthusiasm for continuing to investigate this type of educational partnership. In a complex workplace, with many industries in flux, the skills employers are seeking in our graduates are as much about attitudes, values and motivations as they are about genuine abilities or knowledge (Hager, 2004). If we see learning primarily as a process rather than a product, then it becomes inseparable from contextuality and the influence of cultural and social factors. The learner, then, needs to become, for a time, part of a larger environment, rather than a detached spectator.

## **Methodology**

This project is designed within the qualitative paradigm and fits more within an action research methodology than, for example – case study, ethnography, or grounded theory. Elliott (1991) defines the principal aim of action research to improve practice rather than produce knowledge. Similarly, Freebody (2003) proposes that "it is a 'deliberate' rather than a purely exploratory entry into a naturally-occurring educational setting. That is, it is a planned and self-consciously focused examination of changing practice." With those descriptors in mind this is a collaborative piece of research; participants including the lead researcher are very much part of the investigative and developmental process with the aim of bringing about change and improving practice (Cohen & Manion, 1994). The co-authors' roles in management, program delivery and academic support mean that they are all directly involved in this change process as it occurs. They are not just passive bystanders observing at a distance.

Conducting the research has been divided into four phases. The first phase being a desk-top analysis of which programs incorporate aspects of work-placement including internships, apprenticeships, practicums and basic work experience, whether assessed or non-assessed.

Phase two was a series of unstructured interviews with key staff involved in programs that were identified in phase one as having the potential for modification to incorporate some credit bearing work-based learning.

The third phase is the implementation phase. This began with a second round of interviews with a Head of School and in two cases a Group Leader and agreement reached on: (i) the programs to undergo some redevelopment to incorporate workplace learning as part of the delivery and assessment, and (ii) the steps to be taken to implement the change.

## **Findings**

### *Phase One*

This involved a desk search by one member of the project team of all the program curriculum summaries on the institute's database. A total of 88 formal programs were listed; 55 were identified

as having some form of work experience or work placement; and 16 were identified as possibilities to add some workplace learning component. To gain clarity as to the extent of the work experience/placement in terms of contributing to the credit accumulation for the program, a brief questionnaire was sent to program coordinators. There were 21 responses.

### *Phase Two*

The second phase was a round of interviews conducted by a member of the project team with key people involved in the programs that had been identified. These ranged from a head of school, group leader, program coordinator, and in one case a tutor on one program. Ten existing and six new programs had been identified as having the potential for creating workplace learning opportunities. Our aim for the ITP Business Links project was to find six so this was a great start. The interviewer explored with each person, what focus, if any, was in the program that assisted students in being 'work-ready', possible opportunities to add or enhance the workplace learning opportunities, and thirdly, if there were any potential issues. An outcome of those interviews was that six existing and new programs were agreed as not suitable. During this phase three programs were identified as being exemplars of the inclusion of workplace learning – National Certificate in Business Administration Level Two – Launchpad; Diploma in Social Practice; Bachelor of Computing Systems.

### *Phase Three*

The draft report was then taken by the lead researcher in the project team and a more in-depth discussion held with the relevant head of school and/or the group leader and program coordinator for each of the 10 programs identified at the end of Phase Two. As a result we agreed that we would not make any adjustment to the Diploma in Sport and Recreation as it articulates to the third year of the Bachelor of Sport and Recreation degree which already contains a significant workplace learning project. It was also agreed that the learning contract and associated documents were an exemplar of best practice in the polytechnic.

The National Diploma in Architectural Technology, the NZIM Certificate in Management, the National Certificate in Business Administration Level Four and the Legal Executive certificate were accepted for re-development, primarily with the focus on a more flexible delivery of the programs that enabled people to be in work while studying the program and creating opportunities for assessment to take place in the workplace. This presents a challenge for the national certificates and diplomas where staff tend to focus on the unit standards as being the curriculum and unless the performance criteria specify assessment in the workplace they, the staff, do not see they have any flexibility. This opinion reinforces Dickson's (1995) view that a shift in emphasis towards work based learning requires a reorientation from the notion of work experience being an appendage to a training course but rather integrated within it. In each case those involved in the interviews agreed that this should not be seen as a barrier and that the focus will be on re-designing how we deliver the programs. In the longer term the re-development of the Certificate in Pharmacy Assistant and Cosmetology is planned and it is likely that the workplace learning component will be expanded. One other program, the Certificate in Computer Graphic Design was in the throes of re-development at the time that the Phase Two interviews took place. The changes to the program include assessed work experience and it is now being delivered in its new format.

The new National Diplomas in Logistics, Road Transport Management and Real Estate were also being built around a flexible delivery model. This means that students are more likely to be in employment and therefore aspects of delivery and assessment will incorporate workplace learning.

## **Conclusion**

The focus of this project has been to find opportunities to enhance the Bay of Plenty Polytechnic's engagement with industry and business by increasing opportunities for our students to be involved in workplace learning. The process of identifying those programs that did not already have such opportunities, interviewing key staff, and then further teasing out the most suitable programs has

produced interesting and challenging results. As this paper is being written, various staff members including the lead researcher for this project, are beginning to plan Phase 4: the re-development of the programs for implementation, hopefully for 2007. The expectation is that these forays into new learning territories will be collaboratively monitored, discussed, evaluated, modified and re-trialed so that the action research process will continue, and hopefully provide the sector with rich and meaningful data about new ways to offer our students credit-bearing workplace experience. By allowing them the opportunity to enhance intellectual, personal and ethical growth, we are developing skills that long outlast the classroom experience.

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