

Addressing the Weak Link: Strengthening the Relationship With Sponsors of Work-based Learning

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Abstract

The cooperative education practicum is a compulsory paper in the final year of the BA Social Sciences/Psychology and BA Chinese/Japanese in the Faculty of Applied Humanities at the Auckland University of Technology. It integrates the content of the students' degree with learning through productive work experiences in a placement related to their academic, personal and career goals. Although the paper has been offered for five years, there continues to be disquiet regarding the continuity of and communication with the work-based sponsors who supervise students in the workplace. Their contribution to the three way partnership with students and the university is considerable but the significance of their role has lacked appropriate acknowledgement. This conference paper describes a research project that was designed to explore the sponsorship experience and offer sponsors the opportunity to provide feedback regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the cooperative education practicum. The survey findings regarding the needs and satisfaction levels of sponsors participating in this program are described below. The discussion includes consideration of pertinent literature. The paper concludes with the identification of new initiatives informed by the issues highlighted in the research and an exploration of alternatives which will continue the enhancement of this most important relationship.

Introduction

Three schools in the Faculty of Applied Humanities at the Auckland University of Technology (AUT) collaborated in the establishment of a cooperative education practicum in 2000. They were social sciences, languages and fashion technology. For the past three years this compulsory paper has been undertaken by third year under-graduate students with majors in one of the following: social sciences, psychology, Japanese or Chinese. The paper is considered the capstone of their degree. A workshop series informs the development of a career plan and prepares students to apply the skills and knowledge acquired in their studies in a 150 hour placement in an appropriate workplace. This experience is the basis of the in-depth analysis presented in an oral presentation and a substantial reflective portfolio.

The National Commission of Cooperative Education defines cooperative education as “a structured educational strategy integrating classroom studies with learning through productive work experiences in a field related to a student’s academic or career. It provides progressive experiences in integrating theory and practice” (2004, p. 17). A crucial component of such programs is the partnership between the workplace and the tertiary education provider which facilitates a quality learning experience for the students as well as contributing to the development of the sponsoring organization. This three-way relationship (student, sponsoring organization and university) has specified responsibilities and should be beneficial to all parties. One of the positive outcomes for the university is the enhancement of its responsiveness to the human resource needs of a range of employers. The sponsoring organization benefits also as hosting a student can encourage the development of performance focused learning in the workplace as well as providing a cost-effective recruitment strategy (Shiple, 2001).

An effective partnership should also be characterized by good communication and close collaboration. However, this aspect had not been adequately addressed by the AUT cooperative education practicum (co-op) described above. The relationship between the university and workplace sponsors was identified by lecturers and represented the weak link in this Coop triangle. Whilst, over time, the program had been strengthened in terms of assessments and documentation, support and acknowledgement of the work of sponsors was limited to the provision by students of an introductory letter and a handbook entitled ‘Cooperative Education Practicum Guidelines’ for Sponsors. As students network themselves to find placements, there is rarely an opportunity for contact with co-op staff and sponsors at the initial stage.

Generally, co-op staff contact was limited to brief encounters with those sponsors who were able to find the time to support their students by attending the oral presentations at the end of the program.

In addition, prior to 2003, little effort had been made to maintain a record of the details of organizations that offered sponsorships. Most other work-based learning programs have established relationships with appropriate workplaces which builds the capability of organizations to regularly and reliably provide a performance-enhancing placement for students (Boud et al, 2001). Whilst a more comprehensive database of work placement providers has now been developed, there remains a lack of continuity in terms of where students find workplace opportunities from one year to the next. Despite this, much is expected of sponsors and their input is substantial. Sponsors are expected to negotiate the learning contract and provide students with meaningful work and direction. They must organize meaningful tasks to support the students' achievement of their learning aims and provide feedback regarding the student's performance in the workplace. Sponsors also have to ensure that students have fulfilling and challenging placements and the guidance of the sponsor throughout the process is essential to the students successfully completing the requirements of the cooperative education practicum. Therefore in 2005, attention turned to strengthening the relationship between the university and the sponsors of work-based learning.

Research Design

This conference paper describes the research project, designed by a social science co-op student and supervised by the writer, to explore the sponsorship experience. As the questionnaires were anonymous and completed by a student with support from an academic supervisor, ethics approval was not required. The project offered sponsors the opportunity to provide feedback regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the cooperative education practicum. For the first time, the 38 sponsors of social science/psychology students who were currently providing work placements were invited to attend a social occasion at the university to acknowledge the centrality of their role and their crucial contribution to the cooperative education process. Here, the purpose and function of the research project was explained and questionnaires distributed for completion at the function. Those sponsors not in attendance (approx. 20) were subsequently sent questionnaires that they could complete and return by post.

The questionnaire (Appendix A) consisted of 10 questions which covered the following: the number of times sponsorship had been provided; ratings of key components of the co-op process including communication with AUT, and student capabilities; number of hours used for mentoring; use of the sponsoring organization's resources; how worthwhile the sponsoring experience had been; the skills required by employers; advice for future sponsors; the value of the co-op program; suggestions for improvement and readiness to sponsor again.

There were 22 respondents to the survey from sponsors .14 were sponsoring for the first time, two had students the previous year and six had sponsored more than once. Some 16 were prepared to sponsor in the future, two were unwilling and four failed to respond to the question.

Research Findings

In terms of the quality of the key components of the co-op program, 21 of the 22 respondents were happy with the learning contract negotiation. One respondent, who was unhappy with the student's work despite having spent 80 hours in the supervisory role, rated this aspect as less than satisfactory. There was general satisfaction regarding the information about the co-op process supplied by the student. However, only four respondents were satisfied with the support from AUT, 13 gave neutral responses, four were dissatisfied and one was very dissatisfied. The profile of responses was similarly negative for the question regarding contact with AUT. The attitude, skills and knowledge of students were rated highly by most. The quality of the students' work was judged to be very satisfactory by nine of the respondents, satisfactory by the same number, two were neutral and the single respondent described above rated the work as unsatisfactory.

The number of hours allocated to direction, analysis, feedback and supervision of the student's work during the 150 hour placement ranged from four to 80. The average time spent was 27 hours. When asked to quantify the student's use of the host organization's resources, four respondents felt the usage was significant, 11 thought it was acceptable, five were neutral and one felt the usage was insignificant. All but two of the respondents considered that the investment of the organization's resources was worthwhile in terms of supporting the student placement.

Question 6 asked the respondents to indicate the skills required by the employer for effective performance in the workplace and the results have been tabulated (Appendix B). The skills rated most highly by the vast majority of respondents were verbal and written communication as well as interpersonal and organizational skills. In order of priority, most organizations valued analytical and problem-solving skills, the ability to multi-task and competence in the use of Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel and the Internet. Time management was added to the list of essential skills by one respondent.

When asked to offer advice to future sponsors, several commented that it was important to offer students significant tasks that enabled them to apply their learning independently. Others suggested that clear instructions and goal setting were crucial. Individual respondents remarked that the organization should check the resource implications of sponsorship, the capabilities of the students should be ascertained before the placement begins and a range of tasks should be offered. Question 8 asked the sponsors to rate their satisfaction levels with the overall co-op experience. Approximately 33% were very satisfied with the experience and 50% were satisfied. The remainder were neutral in this regard. There was no clear correlation between the satisfaction levels and the number of supervision hours or the number of time respondents had sponsored.

The final question asked for input regarding how AUT could improve the co-op experience of sponsors. There was agreement that there should be verbal communication with AUT beyond the interaction with the student and that contact with the co-op coordinator should occur. Some sponsors suggested that co-op staff should deliver an orientation to the co-op program. Three observed that there was a lack of clarity regarding the purpose and content of the co-op process. One commented: "The brief needed to be much clearer. Still a bit unsure of the purpose of the exercise." Others commented on the length of time necessary for supervision: "Forty hours is sometimes too much. Twenty to thirty hours would be great." Another respondent asked that students should have clearly defined goals about what they wish to achieve during their placement and take the initiative in asking for training and support.

Discussion

Approximately two thirds of the sponsors surveyed were prepared to sponsor again which reflects general satisfaction with the co-op process. However, there is also a clear message regarding the inadequacy of communication with and support from AUT. Most sponsors were impressed by the capabilities and work of their students. Perhaps more explicit guidance is needed regarding an appropriate level of hours dedicated to supervision. Whilst the level of resourcing necessary to support a student placement was an issue for some, most felt that the investment was worthwhile.

Regarding the skills and knowledge valued in the workplace, there was strong support for the significance of communication and organizational skills. The majority also prioritized analysis and problem-solving as well as Information Technology skills. These marketable skills are the focus of and are developed in the compulsory papers in the BA Social Science/Psychology to better meet the needs of potential employers. Almost all of the papers require oral presentations and written assessments. Group projects are common also and these enhance the interpersonal and organizational skills of the students. Hence the survey results do reflect the relevance and applicability of the skills and knowledge gained in the degree in preparation for entering the workforce.

The responses to the open questions regarding advice for future sponsors and how to improve the co-op experience revealed that the sponsorship role in the workplace is given considerable thought and attention. The concept of autonomous learning is supported as is the transference of the skills and knowledge gained at university to workplace practice. In addition to the recommendation for improvement with reference to the establishment of a communication line with the co-op coordinator, the issues raised were mostly organizational. They were: clarification of why the student wanted workplace experience; the structure and content of the 150 hour placement and the student taking responsibility for initiating the process of training and support. The suggested orientation seminar for co-op sponsors could address these issues.

Considerable work has been done regarding the benefits of cooperative education from the employers' perspective. Braunstein's study identified that the majority perceived as benefits to the organization: "...motivated and enthusiastic young employees, students for permanent appointment, positive interactions with universities...(and) bringing new knowledge into the organization" (1999,

p. 240). Hurd and Hendy (1997) identify that there needs to be more research into the actuality of employers' co-op experiences. The small project mentioned above has compiled feedback from the sponsors who represent a particular component of the host organization, often line managers. They have highlighted some of the problems they face supporting social sciences student placements. The urgency of the putting in place strategies for improved support, communication and training for these sponsors is indisputable as is the need to forge more substantial, long-term relationships with appropriate employers. Only in this manner will this particular iteration of cooperative education be sustainable. A discussion of some of the initiatives described in the literature to strengthen the relationships with key personnel in the workplace follows.

Evans points out that the quality of students' experience and motivation is very much influenced by the interest and commitment of the sponsor (2001). The sponsors in the Social Sciences co-op have identified that they require more support to sustain and enhance and inform their current practice. Clearly more explicit channels of communication need to be established. Hodges, Smith and Jones suggest visits by the coordinator or academic supervisors to workplaces mid-term, an exchange of emails may suffice or a more substantial progress report (2004). The creation of an advisory board is suggested by Boud, Solomon and Symes (2001) or a less formal annual social occasion may bring the partners together for a constructive exchange of ideas and experiences. Mayo (2004) with reference to IBM's enhancement of their cooperative education program recommends the development of a web page which could showcase the successes and challenges of students in the workplace, feature a regular newsletter and provide on-line support for sponsors.

Sponsors in this program currently receive a handbook designed to provide guidelines for their contribution to the cooperative education process. It aims to provide succinct and pertinent advice but a different approach may be more effective. The survey respondents recommended an orientation seminar so face-to-face or an electronic delivery could be considered. This could follow the 'toolkit' model developed by IBM (*ibid*), which has components such as the student evaluation form, a description of the attributes of co-op, a contact form to complete with student, academic supervisor and co-op coordinator contact details, an introduction to the website, and a 'just in time' checklist. It should also include a template of tasks including an "early, comprehensive view of the (organization's) culture, people, products, services and opportunities" (*ibid*, p. 263). This exploration of the norms, practices and values of the workplace is a compulsory component of student assessment which is often done poorly.

One of the most significant failings of the Social Sciences cooperative education program at AUT is neglecting to establish on-going sources of sponsorship. This exacerbates the uncertainty and increases the workload for staff and students. It also impacts on the capacity of organizations who accept a student placement for the first time. Lazarus and Oloroso discuss the necessity of building strong, mutually supportive relationships with employers and maintaining their continuity. They observe that this "involves outreach to all those employers who can provide meaningful, challenging opportunities for students" (2004, p. 183). The characteristics of a suitable workplace are described by Boud and Solomon (2004) as being organizations where: frameworks of corporate capabilities are valued by employees and management, employee development is resourced, there is a record of collaboration, appropriate support structures, career paths, the quality contribution of individuals is acknowledged, the organization has the motivation and is equipped to negotiate a partnership and it offers work which requires reflection and critical problem-solving.

The Schools of Social Sciences and Languages at AUT must provide a visible and effective response to the research findings. As Shipley observes, the "Ownership and involvement of internal stakeholders is an essential underpinning of a sustainable partnership" (2001, p. 151). Therefore, some of the strategies identified in the literature need to be prioritized for action. Early feedback to this paper has been disquiet regarding the reality of all sponsors being able to make themselves available for an orientation seminar. Timing is an issue also, as students seek, confirm and begin their placements at different times. Therefore a brief DVD which sponsors could access when convenient may better suit their needs. Letters checking out their preferences for style of training delivery and interest in sponsoring a student next year will be included in a mail-out of student oral presentation invitations. The DVD could include interviews with experienced sponsors, co-op students and staff. Links could also be made to the co-op web page for documentation regarding work-based learning.

Funding will be sought to support these efforts to enhance the Faculty of Applied Humanities' co-op. This will also include the development of a brochure designed for students to take to sponsors. This will more effectively showcase the paper, outline the co-op process and establish communication links between the organization and AUT. Another new initiative will be to replicate the model developed by the Sport and Recreation Coop at AUT. It invites representatives from 10 organizations interested in sponsoring students who form a panel. They do brief presentations to the student audience and their contact details are posted so that students can follow up their preferred placement organization. There are also several new areas for exploration highlighted by the research project. For example, sponsors have recommended that students be given 'significant tasks' during their placement. It would be interesting to determine how sponsors define a task as sufficiently significant. It would also be valuable to know the sponsor's requirements of their students and the university at the outset of the placement.

This research project has helped confirm aspects of this cooperative education program which are in need of improvement and has initiated the process of being proactive in terms of assuring quality. The group of sponsors from 2005 are about to receive a summary of the research findings. In order to achieve greater breadth and depth in the data, follow-up interviews are planned. Yes, the original project has raised many more questions for us to ponder, but the journey has begun.

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Appendix A

Sponsor Evaluation of Co-op Placement



The School of Social Sciences and the School of Languages offer a cooperative education practicum which integrates learning through productive work experiences. The sponsorship and supervision process in the cooperative placement has an important role in the professional development of the students.

We are interested in your feedback in order to improve and develop the experience of sponsors in the program.

1. How many times have you sponsored a Co-op student?
(Please tick one box)

Once	<input type="checkbox"/>	Twice	<input type="checkbox"/>	More than twice	<input type="checkbox"/>
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2. How would you rate the following?
(Please tick one box)

		Unsatisfactory	Neutral	Satisfactory	Very Satisfactory
Negotiating the Learning Agreement with the student	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The information supplied by the student	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The information supplied by AUT	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Support from AUT	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Contact with AUT	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Student's attitude	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Student's skills and knowledge	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The work completed by the student	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Considering instruction, supervision, and giving feedback approximately how much time over the whole co-op placement would you and your staff have devoted to your co-op student?
4. How would you rate the student's use of resources in your organization?

	Approx. hours				
	Minimal		Neutral		Significant
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Has your investment of resources e.g. time been worthwhile?
(Please tick one box)

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
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6. Please indicate which skills your organization requires in a Co-op student.
(Please tick one box)

Analytical skills	<input type="checkbox"/>	Microsoft Word.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Written communication skills.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	Microsoft Excel.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Verbal communication skills	<input type="checkbox"/>	Microsoft PowerPoint	<input type="checkbox"/>
Interpersonal Skills	<input type="checkbox"/>	Knowledge of Internet Research Tools	<input type="checkbox"/>
Customer Service Skills	<input type="checkbox"/>	Statistics.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Organizational Skills	<input type="checkbox"/>	SPSS	<input type="checkbox"/>
Problem-solving skills	<input type="checkbox"/>	Multi-tasking	<input type="checkbox"/>
Data Analysis	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Others: (Please list).....			
7. If someone you know was considering sponsoring an AUT student, what advice would you give them?
8. How would you rate the overall Co-op experience?
(Please tick one box)

	Unsatisfactory	Neutral	Satisfactory	Very Satisfactory
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. What if anything could AUT do to improve the Co-op experience for you as a sponsor?
10. Would you be prepared to sponsor again?
(Please tick one box)

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Appendix B

Skills Required by Sponsors Organization

