

The challenges of establishing an internship program: Policy, expectations and workloads

Abstract

Government and employers alike are expecting universities to provide work ready graduates who have the professional skills necessary to seamlessly transition into the workplace. Providing students with the authentic learning experiences required to acquire these skills is an ongoing challenge for universities both in Australia and across the globe. Swinburne University who already has a long and proud tradition of offering work integrated learning (WIL) opportunities for its undergraduate students has recently expanded its range of WIL programs in an attempt to meet the changing expectations of Government and students. This has led to the Faculty of Business and Enterprise at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne to reassess the programs it offers and investigate new options.

Evaluating and developing a WIL program from the ground up is a challenging and difficult task. New programs not only need to be sensitive to student learning needs but also meet a plethora of complex government and university policies and administrative requirements. Adequate resourcing, accreditation, the new subjects' relationship to existing programs, curriculum design, staff capacity and capabilities, recruitment, along with marketing and discipline specific requirements must all be considered.

This paper explores the challenges faced by the Faculty of Business and Enterprise as it investigates the feasibility of establishing a 'credit bearing' internship program to be undertaken in an industrial or commercial setting. The research approach adopted was qualitative in nature with data acquired from a range of stakeholders in order to obtain views from a wide variety of perspectives. A number of student focus groups, comprising both local and international students, were conducted along with interviews of academic staff, and employers from various professions, some of whom were involved with internships and those who were not.

The paper discusses the various challenges that have been identified through the project and makes suggestions about how to develop internship opportunities with due recognition of competing demands and expectations.

Introduction

Since Dawkin's (Department of Education, Science and Training, 1988) review of Australian Higher Education in the 80's, a series of Australian governments have sought to redefine the role of universities in building social and economic capital. We now have what Blackmore and Sachs (2007) call a 'paradigm convergence' between education and social policy where universities are seen as the change agents responsible for developing the long-term prosperity and economic growth of the nation (Gillard, 2008).

Government expectation is for individual institutes to develop and implement the federal vision. To help achieve these initiatives, universities are seeking closer associations and partnerships with industry and business and are rapidly adopting a more vocational focus to their curriculum. So strong is this push that in 2008 Universities Australia, the peak body of Australian University Vice Chancellors, developed at the request of the Australian Government a position paper on the development of a National Internship Scheme to 'enable more Australian university students to undertake structured work-based learning in industry during their studies' (Universities Australia, 2008 p 1). Recent policy documents (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008; Cleary, Flynn, Thomasson, Alexander, & McDonald, 2007; Commonwealth Department of Education Science & Training, 2002; Universities Australia, 2008) further urge universities to adopt a more student centred and authentic learning approach to build work ready graduates with the professional skills necessary to seamlessly transition into the workplace.

However in times of rapid change and shifting priorities, where universities increasingly need to compete for the student dollar, government rhetoric and policy does not automatically come with extra funding for such initiatives. In 2005, the Australian Government identified a clear separation between 'workplace experiences' and 'learning and performance in the workplace' (Attorney-general's department, 2003). Funding was removed for sandwich programs (6 or 12 month full time placements) unless the university 'directs the learning'. This meant that universities had to ensure that the learning process in such initiatives was 'guided' and 'directed' in order to attract Commonwealth Supported Place (CSP) funding (see Bates, 2008; Weisz and Smith, 2005). Universities were placed in an invidious position where they could offer internships and work placement programs, and meet the strict government regulations, or charge students for their co-operative education opportunity.

The University vision

Swinburne University has a long term commitment to industry placements and students have been able to undertake a discipline specific, industry based learning placement in their undergraduate degree since 1963. Recently the university has undertaken a curriculum framework review where a range of new curriculum options were investigated. This review led to the university wide establishment of the Swinburne Professional Learning Model (PLM) which provides a variety of internal and external ‘work integrated learning’ (WIL) opportunities for students from capstone projects, careers in the curriculum, study tours and industry placements. Thus, there is a suite of work related opportunities where students are exposed to real world learning opportunities throughout their program of study. The overarching purpose of the PLM is to provide students with the opportunity to apply their theoretical knowledge in an authentic workplace setting where they can develop new skills and knowledge while gaining a deeper understanding of their discipline and the professional working environment of their discipline.

One of the major challenges that Swinburne currently faces, despite the considerable work done in developing the PLM within the university is in providing industry work experience for international students. A recent national scoping study on WIL by Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher and Pretto (2008) highlighted the issue of access and equity for international students who often make up a significant proportion of the student cohort: ‘How do we prepare the international students for employment and how do we deal with potential issues and prejudices in the work place towards international students and their capabilities?’ (Patrick et al., 2009: 36). The Faculty of Business and Enterprise (FBE) at Swinburne has large numbers of international students and although the PLM is embedded in the business degree there are very limited work place opportunities for international students, and many local students are not incorporating the optional components in their degrees.

The Faculty perspective

In support of the university’s Professional Learning Model and in an attempt to increase WIL learning opportunities for both international students and local students the FBE at Swinburne decided to investigate whether offering an unpaid, credit bearing internship program would appeal to various stakeholders (industry, students and university staff) whilst meeting the government requirements.

Internships, in this context, are defined as unpaid work placements designed around projects negotiated between the student, the employer or client, and the university. Students are expected to ‘design the project’ while situated at the university and then ‘complete the project’ while undertaking an industry placement. Supervision of the project would be undertaken jointly by a workplace supervisor and an academic mentor. The intention is that the internships would be available throughout the year dependant on the needs of the industry partner.

The internships needed to be seen as a genuine alternative to Swinburne’s traditional Industry Based Learning (IBL) program as the overall aim was to increase participation rates in WIL across the faculty rather than just move interest from one program to another. It was decided that any new WIL program would need to:

1. be academically rigorous,
2. incorporate an ‘authentic’ workplace project,
3. be negotiated and planned by students
4. supervised by both academic and workplace staff,
5. designed to develop professional, discipline specific skills,
6. completed in the workplace,
7. available throughout the year,
8. credit bearing, part time and unpaid.

A project working party, made up of faculty management, undergraduate programs coordinator, administrative staff and WIL specialists was established to inform the development of an ‘internship process flow chart’ which identified key stakeholders (student, industry, administration, management, finance and academic supervisors), project deliverables (partnership development, curriculum development, accreditation, recruitment, student/ project matching, delivery, placement, supervision, assessment) and map them against the university’s academic calendar. A series of focus groups and interviews with stakeholders were conducted to inform the above process and gauge support for the program.

The Challenges

Generally, there was wide spread support for a credit bearing internship option from both students and employers. Several employers felt that students brought young and fresh ideas to the workplace and saw international students as adding diversity and richness. Academic

and administrative staff were also supportive of the concept but identified a range of complex challenges inherent in the operationalisation and implementation of internship programs such as pedagogy, resources, roles, workload, participation and nomenclature.

One of the many challenges identified related to the increasing number of stakeholders to be kept 'happy' in an internship program. Industry partners were keen to participate in an internship program but were not interested in the fine detail surrounding pedagogical approaches or compliance requirements. Students just wanted 'work experience' and the broader the range of opportunities the better. Students interviewed were keen to gain credit and prepared to undertake the academic study associated with this credit, but wanted diversity and felt that it was the responsibility of the University to develop a range of WIL opportunities. Questions relating to sustainability and resourcing were of great concern to faculty management who were extremely wary of committing to a program that would require considerable input from academic and administrative staff.

Despite the conflicting perspectives of stakeholders their concerns were not generally related to the worth of the concept but rather the selection and implementation of the pedagogical model to be used, and ongoing management of the program. This led to a number of key thematic challenges being identified and investigated.

Diversity of academic models; one size does not fit all

Identifying the appropriate pedagogical approach to facilitate deep learning, whilst still meeting government requirements for 'directed' learning poses a significant challenge. WIL initiatives such as internships should be designed and 'constructively aligned' the same way as any other subject that is part of a degree (Cate and Jones, 1999). This should include the development of learning goals, aims and objectives which should inform the program design, content and the assessment tasks. Outcomes of the internship need to have academic merit and be of value to all stakeholders.

Negotiating appropriate and meaningful projects to be undertaken within the internship framework may prove challenging. Projects by their very nature are unique and the work required to achieve the desired outcome may be difficult to estimate and vary from project to project; boundaries must be clearly defined (Weisz and Smith, 2005). Finding the right balance will require experienced facilitation by university staff.

Creating the optimum learning environment for internships can be difficult and complex, as, unlike the classroom, in the workplace the student is not necessarily the central concern, and the learning experiences are often unique and unpredictable (Billett, 2006). Hence, a rigidly defined program of learning in the workplace is difficult to establish (Flinders University, 2009). Employers too need to understand the educational expectations of the student and the university play critical part in the learning experience.

Reflection on experiences should be central to any WIL program as this facilitates deep learning for students and equips them for the future (Weisz and Smith, 2005), however this is of little value to the employer. As Dewey (1938) noted, in relation to real world learning, not every experience is educational and it is up to academics to plan tasks to maximise reflection and student learning. Providing students with the opportunity to reflect on the integrated nature of their learning experience from both theoretical and applied perspectives is almost as important as the experience itself (Bennett, Eagle, Mousley and Ali-Choudhury, 2008). Thus assessment tasks need to incorporate professional outcomes for industry as well as evidence interns' learning.

What about integration?

Internships should not be considered as add-ons, but rather should be integrated into the academic program in order to optimise the learning opportunity (Patrick et al, 2009). According to Weisz and Smith (2005) 'Cooperative education programs provide learning opportunities for students that enable them to integrate their work and their academic experiences' (p. 606) and many universities claim this as one of the key benefits for students undertaking a WIL experience. However Coll, Eames, Packu and Lay (2009) claim that little is done to formally integrate the knowledge between the university and the workplace and vice versa. Coll et al (2009) suggest that programs should ensure that there is a connection between the formal university setting and the informal workplace learning. Academic staff developing new programs such as internships need to explicitly address this issue in their curriculum design and proactively work to develop learning opportunities that integrate university theoretical models with the workplace learning.

Communication and common understanding

High expectations challenge students and encourage superior outcomes (Cate and Jones, 1999). This is true for both 'academic' and 'professional' expectations; it is critical for the student, employer and supervising academic to discuss and agree upon the internship requirements. Students need to know exactly what is expected of them if they are to achieve the desired outcomes. It is important to establish protocols relating to formal feedback and assessment as students need to know how they are progressing if they are to learn from their experiences (Cate and Jones, 1999; Weisz and Smith, 2005). This contention was supported by several employers, some of whom quoted experiences they had with other institution that had established formal feedback systems which they felt assisted all parties. Some of the employers were actively seeking guidance from the university saying they did not have the educational expertise to provide appropriate feedback relating to the academic components of the work placements.

Academics and professional practice managers identified the need for evaluation systems to collect feedback from all stakeholders especially students and employers, for quality assurance purposes and to facilitate continuous improvement. Given the unique nature of internships it may be difficult to develop a standard evaluation instrument.

Assessment and grading

Issues surrounding work based assessment tasks are complex. There needs to be a clear understanding by all of what is actually being assessed; is it academic skills, technical skills, generic skills or a combination of all of these? Does grading focus on the student's ability to communicate their workplace learning experience or is it simply based on the success of their project? Another tricky issue is who actually does the assessment. Is it the academic, the workplace supervisor or a combination of both? Issues surrounding compliance to University standards are severely challenged by this debate. Do employers have the skills required and if so what quality assurance and moderation processes apply and how can this process be made equitable for all participating students? There are other equity issues surrounding the complexity and degree of difficulty of the projects which are likely to vary and may require varying degrees of effort and time for successful completion.

To comply with the requirements of the major assessment task in the internship program frequent interaction between the student in the workplace and academic mentors is seen as pivotal. The complex nature of the learning that takes place needs to be acknowledged and

articulated in the assessment tasks. Given the diverse nature of the proposed internships, assessment would need to be individualised. An effective method for addressing these issues is through the use of learning contracts. Learning contracts are agreements between students and academics about the assessment requirements of the individual learning experience. They are based on the principle of the learner being an active partner in the process, rather than a passive recipient (Atherton, 2009; Codde, 2006). In this case the final contract would need to be negotiated between the student, university and the employer and clearly define the responsibilities and expectations of each party. During the placement the student would expect to receive feedback from the employer on various aspects relating to their placement, as well as from their academic mentor on the progress of their project work and assessment task. Contracts may need to be renegotiated or modified if circumstances change during the internship. Developing learning contracts may prove to be difficult for both students and academics alike if they have had little experience with this technique.

There was general agreement from students and employers that grading should be the responsibility of both the university and employer. One employer remarked that while it was 'difficult to convert a job into a university grade' they could see great benefit of working with the academic to review the student's achievements in the workplace. It is important that both the learning and the performance in the workplace is integrated into the grading process. Developing appropriate assessment tasks as well as determining how they will be graded are challenges that plague many WIL programs and some employers are reluctant to participate in the assessment as they prefer to stay at arms length and have the final product assessed objectively. The time involved in assessing may be an additional deterrent for some employers.

Staff workload

The organisation and management of internships are extremely time consuming for faculties. Often WIL initiatives are under resourced making it difficult to introduce new initiatives such as the credit bearing internships. Administrative staff are concerned that existing resources will be stretched too far and require more dedicated input than existing programs such as Swinburne's IBL. Current academic workload models reward research, and although there is an allowance for teaching activities there is little recognition of the mentoring and administrative tasks associated with internships. Workload is an issue for administrative staff as well, who are likely to be responsible for the recruitment of both the internships and the

projects. Recruitment of specialised placements is likely to be time consuming and erratic especially in the current difficult economic climate. There is a danger of a roll on effect taking place where poor resourcing for one program validates poor resourcing for a new one. One interviewee said ‘we struggle in our role; people seem to underestimate the amount of time it actually takes to develop relationships and maintain relationships with industry.’

Student engagement

A number of interesting issues emerged during the student focus groups and interviews. One was the students’ desire to incorporate their professional part-time work into their degree. This was echoed by some academics who talked about the opportunity to leverage off students’ existing part time jobs to formally assess the development of professional skills.

It is often difficult to get student to participate in WIL options. An expressed interest in participation is not always transferred into take up of a program. According to Bullock, Gold, Hejmadi and Lock (2009) there are two groups of students who opt not to participate in work placements. The first group make an informed decision, and do not wish to break their studies or believe that they have adequate work experience; the second group lack the confidence, maturity and appropriate access to support and information about placement options.

Marketing of internships

Future success of the internship program in the FBE is reliant not only on marketing or promotion to students but keeping them fully informed about the benefits for their professional careers. This will require a cultural change within the faculty, one which promotes the internship program as an appropriate extension of the discipline being studied. This cultural change is not solely for the benefit of students; discipline academics need to understand its importance within the program if it is to be seen as fully integrated into a courses professional practice.

This is difficult to achieve when there is no uniformity of nomenclature relating to WIL across the higher education sector as well as within the university. Swinburne University offers a diverse range of work place learning opportunities yet there is little consistency across faculties. Internally this is seen as a strength however it poses a challenge which is how to communicate clearly to all the stakeholders what the FBE internship program entails and how it differs from other available programs.

Internships will require significant input from the industry partner, with no guarantee of return. 'Employers will want to know 'what is in it for us? It must be a win/win situation' (Employer). Marketing the concept to potential employers will be difficult and challenging and some may not be interested in the 'academic work' involved. However there is strong support from industry partners interested in becoming involved in the development of students in their profession but large numbers are likely to take some time to develop and there is a clear need for an extensive internal/external marketing and promotional campaign if the program is to be successfully initiated.

Competitive Market

Career development and WIL have been a recurring theme for national funding as successive Australian governments strive to meet the demands of national skill shortages and an employment market seeking more highly skilled, work ready graduates. This trend has meant that the traditional market sector in which Swinburne has dominated, is now under threat, with 34 of 39 universities surveyed in 2008 signalling their intention to adopt a WIL approach in the one or more of their programs (Patrick et al, 2009; Pocknee, 2009). Although an institution may have developed excellent relationships with employers over many years, other universities who are now beginning to introduce WIL into the curriculum are wooing them through extensive marketing programs. The university is finding it is now competing for its traditional partners. This is placing considerable pressure on existing programs and as well as new formats such as internships. Establishing a consistent, ongoing database of partners is imperative to sustainability and success but building such data bases is expensive and time consuming. In some disciplines it can also be quite difficult to identify suitable internship projects, for example, in accounting where 'projects' are not the norm, and industry based projects are seen to be prestigious and undertaken by senior staff.

Resourcing

Universities may want to offer a variety of student centred pedagogical approaches for WIL but are often constrained by the financial costs involved in providing the ongoing support and facilitation required to achieve the intended and desired learning outcomes for students. 'This is particularly so in the case of Australia where universities are under enormous pressure of reduced government funding and the long-term sustainability of cooperative education programs is under threat' (Weisz and Smith, 2005, p.606). There is an ongoing tension of

balancing what is pedagogically optimal with what is financially viable. Weisz and Smith (2005), as well as Patrick et al (2009) claim that it is imperative to provide adequate funding as well as involve experienced staff to source positions, liaise with industry, prepare students and mentor them throughout their placement. Interestingly little formal work has been done to estimate the costs associated with developing and running such co-op programs.

WIL programs are demanding on scarce human resources and require considerable professional development for academic staff moving into the area. Despite the rhetoric from the top, most universities consider it more cost-effective to deliver large lectures to campus based students, than to schedule industry based visits by academics or run intensive workshops that cater for no more than handful of students at a time. The extra resources required to make this vision a reality, especially in non-traditional disciplines, puts a strain on already constrained faculty budgets.

Professional development

The challenges of operationalising the FBE's internship program extend beyond resourcing, promotion and identification of suitable industry partners and projects. Attracting and professionally developing staff moving into the area is an ongoing challenge as many academics see a career in WIL as a career killer and too demanding of their limited time (Patrick et al, 2009). According to the Graduate Employability Skills Report (Business, Industry and Higher Education Collaboration Council, 2007) many workplace supervisors do not have well developed skills to engage with and support students in placements, whilst Weisz and Smith (2005) claim that successful cooperative education initiatives require 'attitudinal changes' in academic staff. Hence it can be very difficult to effectively implement WIL initiatives without adequate professional development for academics as well as industry partners. Ensuring that academic mentors and employers understand their roles, provide a supportive environment and meaningful projects is critical to the success of such programs (Crebert, 1995).

Risk management

Before introducing a WIL program, whether internships or traditional placements, there needs to be careful consideration of the risks involved. In the first instance cost analysis and feasibility studies should be undertaken before programs are accredited and implemented in an effort to identify the most suitable, relevant and sustainable models for faculties. These

feasibility studies need to take into account the complex interplay of success and failure factors that surround programs, as well as hidden pedagogical value and benefits of WIL programs (Pretto et al, 2009).

Considerations around market share, fluctuations in demand, recruitment costs, and human resource demands need to be carefully considered and contingency plans developed where possible. Strategies for dealing with the difficult tasks of managing students at a distance, breakdowns in relationship during internships, significant change in personnel or restructuring within the host organisation need to be developed.

Conclusion

In this case study we have tried to highlight some of the key issues and challenges that the Faculty of Business and Enterprise at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne faced when investigating and developing a new internship program. Although WIL programs are clearly beneficial to all stakeholders involved there are many considerations that must be taken into account if sustainable programs are to be implemented and successfully operationalised within a university context because as Cuban (1988) warns, most educational initiatives flounder on the rocks of flawed implementation.

There are no clear answers to the challenges each institution faces and a 'one size fits all' program will not meet the complex needs of students, university, employers and policy makers. However there are some basic principles which can inform the process. Programs need to be:

- Underpinned by good pedagogy and integrated within courses,
- Provide authentic real world learning experiences which are appropriately assessed,
- Fully costed and resourced,
- Staffed by well trained and professionally developed personnel,
- Flexible enough to tolerate fluctuations in the market demands,
- Designed to meet stakeholders needs, and
- Given time to grow and develop.

Despite the keen interest in the development of the new internship program within the faculty it can only be successfully implemented with the full support of senior management. Without the University placing a strategic importance on the initiative, adequately funding the

programs' development and implementation, and providing the professional development for university staff and industry partners involved with the initiative it can not be success. There is a need for a strong congruence of policy, culture and support if successful implementation is to occur.

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