

Assessing and learning in internships: Reflecting on pedagogy and progress

Abstract

An elective internship unit as part of a work integrated learning program in a business faculty is presented as a case study.

In the unit, students complete a minimum of 120 hours work placement over the course of a 13 week semester. The students are majoring in advertising, marketing, or public relations and are placed in corporations, government agencies, and not for profit organisations.

To support and scaffold the students' learning in the work environment, a range of classroom and online learning activities are part of the unit.

Classroom activities include an introductory workshop to prepare students for placement, an industry panel, and interview workshop. These are delivered as three workshops across the semester.

Prior to commencing their placement, students complete a suite of online learning modules. The Work Placement Preparation Program assists students in securing obtaining a placement and make a successful transition to the work environment. It provides an opportunity for students to source possible work placement sites, prepare competitive applications, develop and rehearse interview skills, deal with workplace issues, and use a student ePortfolio to reflect on their skills and achievements.

Students contribute to a reflective blog throughout their placement, with feedback from academic supervisors throughout the placement.

The completion of the online learning modules and contribution to a reflective blog are assessed as part of the unit. Other assessment tools include a internship plan and learning contract between the student, industry supervisor, and academic supervisor; job application including responses to selection criteria; and presentation to peers, academics and industry representatives at a poster session.

The paper discusses the development of the internship unit over three years, particularly learning activities and assessment. The reflection and refinement of the unit is informed by a pedagogical framework, and the development of processes to best manage placement for all stakeholders. A model of best practice is proposed, that can be adapted to a variety of discipline areas.

Introduction

This paper presents a case study in the development of assessment and learning activities in an elective internship unit as part of a work integrated learning program.

The unit, AMB310 Internship (the Internship unit), is a 12 credit point unit which is delivered across a 13 week semester. The Internship unit is housed within the Faculty of Business at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and offered to undergraduate students majoring in advertising, marketing and public relations across courses in business and mass communication.

QUT is strongly positioned as 'a university for the real world', which is reflected in its brand positioning and evidenced through its goals of achieving practical, work integrated and professional experience for its students (QUT Blueprint, 2008). QUT has been working toward a more systematic and sustainable approach to the offering and coordinating of cooperative education and work integrated learning, including off campus experiences such as internships. This approach has been more focused over the past three years, invigorated by a series of major commissioned teaching and learning projects on real world learning. One project focused on work integrated learning (WIL) and facilitated sharing, developing and refining of ideas and best practice in WIL across the QUT community. The WIL project also propelled QUT involvement in external communities of practice, which further opened opportunities for sharing of best practice models.

The WIL project, and associated activities particularly in the Faculty of Business, has resulted in clearer alignment between the Internship unit and its place within the curriculum, the pedagogy underpinning cooperative education and work integrated learning, and brought clarity to the links with QUT strategic goals. A key directive of the WIL project was the exploration of integrating WIL experiences into the curriculum to assist in meeting students' expectations of real-world linkages and contribute to QUT's broader engagement strategy. A

key aim is to make WIL placement offerings more accessible for both students and industry partners across QUT. Internship and work placement units across disciplines at QUT is viewed as making a significant contribution to the aim. The Internship unit (AMB310) is a specific example of such a unit, and through its development and refinement over a number of semesters is emerging as an exemplar for QUT and other institutions, particularly in the discipline areas where internships are elective, rather than required, elements of the curriculum.

This paper explores the evolution of the Internship unit from a niche unit with small enrolments, tracking over three years particularly on the refinement of its learning activities and assessment. An overview of internship programs is presented as a frame for discussion. The Internship unit is then examined specifically with an overview of the unit and discussion of assessment and learning activities adopted in the unit. A model of best practice, anchored by key points of activity suggested for internships is presented.

Internship Programs

As summarised by Inkster and Ross (1998) an internship is well described as a “three-way partnership between the educational institution, the student intern, and the organisation where the interns take on the challenges of a program of systematic experiential learning”. There are typically three major stakeholders in an internship program; the student, the academic supervisor and the industry (or field) supervisor. Each of these partners gains significant benefits from internship programs. Students gain real-world experience; academic programs’ reputations grow and employers gain an improved pool of student applicants who have been ‘tried’ from which to recruit for fulltime employment (Patterson 1999). The ongoing challenge for internship programs is to determine the most appropriate assessment that satisfies the requirements of all three partners, while encouraging reflection and integration of theory and practice, within the constraints that result from the level of engagement of

workplace supervisors and the ability of academic supervisors to become involved in the workplace (Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher & Preto, 2008, p. 42). It is with this three-way partnership in mind and the focus on experiential and blended learning that the current Internship unit has been developed and refined.

Case Study - AMB310 Internship

The Internship unit is an elective unit available offered to undergraduate students majoring in advertising, marketing and public relations across courses in business and mass communication.

This unit is offered throughout the calendar year, ie in Semesters 1, 2 and Summer Semester. Approximately 100 students enrol in the unit each year. Students are placed in industry positions for a minimum period of 120 hours over the course of a 13 week semester. Industry partners include corporations including agency/consultancy environments in the discipline areas, government agencies, and not for profit organisations. To undertake the unit, students need to have attained a pass level across their course of study measured by a grade point average of 4.0 (on a 7 point scale) or higher. The grade point average requirement was introduced in Semester 2, 2006 to ensure that students can demonstrate their ability to undertake all of the basic skills in their discipline before starting the placement.

Students are responsible for securing their own placement and all placements must be approved by the academic supervisors. There are a number of industry partners linked to the unit and offering placements each semester or particular projects in a selected semester.

These placements and projects are made available to students via the unit's online teaching site and students must apply and undergo an interview and selection process with industry partners.

Students in the Internship unit are graded on a satisfactory/unsatisfactory scale, rather than a numerical scale. Satisfactory achievement in the unit is measured by successful completion of

learning activities, assessment items, and feedback from industry supervisors. To support and scaffold the students' learning in the work environment, a blended learning approach is taken combining a range of classroom and online activities. There are also a number of assessment items which complement students' work based learning. Briefly, to satisfactorily complete the unit students need to complete three assessment items (internship plan, preparation of a job application including responses to selection criteria, presentation of a reflective poster at a showcase session); contribute to an individual reflective blog; complete online preparatory careers modules; and complete the 120 hours to the satisfaction of their industry supervisor. The delivery of the Internship unit is structured around a 13 week teaching semester; however the unit is delivered via face-to-face workshops and online chat rooms in Blackboard. As part of the ongoing refinement of the unit between 2007 and the end of 2009, the three hour classroom based workshops have decreased from five sessions (plus two presentation sessions) to three sessions with an additional poster showcase which will be discussed further below. From Semester One, 2009, these class based workshop sessions have been supplemented with weekly optional online chat sessions in Blackboard, facilitated by academic teaching staff. The workshop sessions are designed to introduce the students to the features, benefits and challenge of work integrated learning experiences, particularly internships and to help students achieve the most benefit from their experiential learning journey. This blended learning approach incorporating technology and face-to-face sessions provides students with support and mentoring on a regular, but 'as needs' basis. The online sessions were not always utilised but when they were they often focused on assessment issues, guidance for issues in the workplace, and general support and mentoring. Prior to commencing their placement, students complete a suite of online learning modules focusing on work integrated learning. These modules were developed by QUT's Career and Employment Service. This Work Placement Preparation Program assists students in securing

a placement and making a successful transition into the work environment. It provides an opportunity for students to source possible work placement sites, prepare competitive applications, develop and rehearse interview skills, and deal with workplace challenges.

Learning workshops and assessment activities

In the first workshop students are introduced to the concept of work integrated and experiential learning including reflective practice, how to secure a placement, how to make the most from a placement and taken through the learning resources and assessment for the unit. Most recently, this workshop has placed stronger emphasis on the learning theory and practice underpinning work integrated and experiential learning and focused on how students can develop as reflective practitioners, particularly through reflective writing. Graduate capabilities, generic skills and professional identity concepts are used as 'hooks' for students to plan their internship and longer term career.

An online reflective blog was introduced in 2009 to overcome the shortcomings experienced from the previous learning activities and assessment items which included a hard copy reflective journal and report. The online reflective blog allowed for monitoring and feedback from academic supervisors. More attention was also given to students developing skills in reflective writing, by providing guidelines for reflection such as those suggested by Francis (1995) and Bain, Ballantyne, Packer and Mills (1999), introducing reflective techniques in face-to-face workshops and providing 'triggers' for student reflection. The online blogs and learning activities have seen students move from predominantly descriptive approaches seen in journals, to deeper and strongly developed reflection.

An Internship plan is developed by students and submitted as their first piece of assessment. The Internship plan is viewed as a negotiated learning contract between the student, their industry supervisor and their academic supervisor. In addition to a description of the organisation where a student is placed and timeline for placement, students set specific

objectives for the placement and how these will be measured. These objectives are aligned closely with graduate capabilities, generic skills, and specific discipline skills. By aligning objectives and graduate attributes, students are more likely to enhance their employability by demonstrating soft skill achievement (Treleaven and Voola, 2008).

The second workshop for the internship unit is a career planning and industry practitioner forum. In the first part of the workshop staff from the Careers and Employment Division at QUT lead a session on career planning. This is designed to help students set career goals and an action list on how to achieve these goals. The second half of the workshop is an industry panel featuring graduates who have undertaken the Internship unit within the previous five years.

The third workshop is related to students' second assessment piece, a job application including responses to selection criteria. Students respond to current real world job advertisements, which are selected by academic supervisors and posted on the Blackboard teaching site. The student applications are distributed to industry partners for critique and feedback. These industry partners then lead interview workshops with students. Students receive written feedback from academic supervisors and industry partners, along with verbal feedback from industry partners, academic supervisors, and peers. Students are also encouraged to reflect on their interview skills during the workshop and in their reflective blogs.

The Interview workshop culminates in a poster showcase. The poster presentation was introduced in Semester 1, 2009 to replace a formal class presentation using PowerPoint related to their reflective report. These posters are designed to close the feedback loop. The aim of the poster is to present a review and reflection of the internship. The poster provides the audience with a 'snapshot' of their experience throughout the internship and their reflections on the skills, knowledge and abilities they have acquired. Industry supervisors,

other industry partners including representatives from key industry bodies, along with academic staff from across the university attend the poster showcase. Students discuss their posters and in turn, their experiences and learning. This approach builds on the networking opportunities provided to them through their placement (O'Toole, 2007).

Posters are not a commonly used assessment or presentation method in business disciplines. Therefore, to help prepare the students for this poster showcase, information is provided on the Blackboard site including guidelines for preparing posters and the presentation session, links to websites which illustrated how to create effective posters and a YouTube clip which demonstrates how a poster session works. In most recent semester, students were shown posters from the previous semester in the first workshop session and photos of the poster showcase were provided on the Blackboard site from the previous semester. A criteria referenced assessment (CRA) rubric was also introduced. The rubric was designed as a guide for students' planning and developing their poster and set clear benchmarks for satisfactory achievement. It is a checklist which incorporates important dimensions under the key elements of poster presentation, poster content and audience engagement.

The final requirement to satisfactorily complete the unit is the appraisal by the industry supervisor. There is continual discussion about what role industry supervisors should play in assessing internship students largely focusing on the inability of supervisors to assign grades (Tovey 2001). Industry supervisors are best placed to evaluate job performance and attitude to work. In the Internship unit supervisors assess students' performance and attitude on 15 work-related skills which are developed around the QUT Graduate Capabilities. These skills are measured on seven point Likert scale with the end points strongly agree (7), strongly disagree (1). Example items include: 'The intern is enthusiastic about his/her work'; 'The intern displays an appropriate level of initiative and seeks clarification on areas of uncertainty'; and 'The intern demonstrated a strong ability to think strategically and develop

realistic solutions to business problems'. This more detailed evaluation tool was introduced in Semester 1, 2009 replacing a less sophisticated matrix form. The refinement of this scale enables clearer evaluation of discipline specific and generic skills.

Conclusion

AMB310 provides an example of best practice for Internship units. This unit has been developed over a number of years and receives extremely good evaluations from students and industry partners. AMB310 consistently rates above University and Faculty averages for end of semester student Learning Experience Survey results. Results for the last five teaching semesters on overall satisfaction with the unit have been between 4 and 5 on a 5 point scale with 5 being the highest. The unit is also growing in popularity every semester with increasing enrolments. The 'buy-in' from industry partners is also increasing with a number of companies choosing an ongoing relationship with QUT and taking a number of students across different semesters. Industry partners rate the unit favourably based on the calibre of students they have interning for them, the preparation of the students prior to the unit and on the administration of the unit. As one supervisor wrote in her evaluation (Semester One 2009) referring to the reflection that students are encouraged to do during the unit; "I think the reflective practice is really important. It is good for them to ... find a balance between work and personal goals". Another spoke of the recently introduced poster presentations; "I think it is really beneficial to the students to connect with the people they have worked with and potentially other people that are involved in the internship program. It is a fantastic networking experience for them to meet people who have come here from different backgrounds and different companies".

The development and refinement of the Internship unit presented in this case study has resulted in a range of learning activities, approaches to assessment, and developments in teaching and learning within work integrated learning units which can be applied across

discipline areas. To satisfy the experiential learning goals of an internship unit and the three stakeholders in the relationship, there are a number of points which need to be considered in a model of best practice.

- Students need to be ultimately responsible for securing placements as this implies ownership over the experience and ensure a level of responsibility required to undertake the placement.
- A blended learning environment should to be introduced to enable effective and practical learning given the time pressures and preferred learning styles of interns, industry supervisors and academic supervisors.
- A future oriented learning contract should be established between the three stakeholders which helps define the internship experience and objectives to be achieved ensuring that everyone is satisfied and understands their role in the internship.
- Prior to commencing internships students should undergo work preparedness modules to aid them in applying for jobs and their transition into the workforce.
- Reflective practice should be incorporated throughout the internship journey. It is best to set this up by introducing students to the idea of the theory of reflection such as reflecting on, in and for action. Online capturing of this encourages immediacy of input and easier feedback by academic supervisors.
- An endpoint needs to be established in the internship to bring the students back into the academic environment and provide them with an opportunity to reflect on their internship experience. A poster showcase is an example of a forum where this can occur and where students can network and share their experiences and learning journey with peers, academic staff and industry guests.

- Assessment or learning activities should enhance the learning environment for students and contribute to their workplace preparedness. Example activities and workshops include; job applications and career planning.
- By embedding graduate capabilities and generic skills throughout the planning and reflection of an internship unit students and industry partners are able to see achievement based on soft skills as well as discipline specific skills.

An internship unit is valuable in any discipline. It helps in graduate preparedness and ultimately employability (Treleaven and Voola, 2008). Through active promotion of reflective practice, experiential learning and achievement of graduate capabilities we are best able to prepare our students for the workforce and encourage real-world learning. AMB310 will continue to evolve to meet the needs of students and industry partners and ensure maximum success for all those involved. Nevertheless, it stands as a good example of how to combine classroom based learning and real world learning and how to satisfy all parties involved.

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