Sustaining a WIL Community on an Island – Triumphs & Tribulations – A Case study: University of Tasmania, Australia, Faculty of Business – Corporate Internship Program

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Abstract

Exceptional performances delivered by participants in the Corporate Internship Program (CIP) facilitate continuous, positive engagement between Tasmania’s business community and the Faculty of Business at the island State’s only university, UTAS. Since its inception in 2007, the CIP has offered semester-based, credit-bearing internship electives to almost 300 undergraduate students enrolled in degrees and/or combined degrees in the Faculty of Business. In 2013, this offer was extended to include a small number of postgraduates. Former interns, having worked their way up the corporate ladder, are now re-inventing themselves as Mentors to new intakes of student interns, creating and sustaining a culture of learning, both within and external to the Tasmanian academy. Solicited and unsolicited feedback from all participants ensures the UTAS Faculty of Business continues to offer a suite of relevant course offerings to students; developing their graduate attributes, whilst addressing the needs of a dynamic business environment. Many challenges have been overcome to ensure the longevity of the Corporate Internship Program in a relatively conservative, tightly-knit business community, offering limited employment opportunities.

This paper will address issues encountered in structuring a work-integrated learning (WIL) Program to secure engagement with a conservative business community, value-adding to the Program’s future and an island state’s social and economic prosperity. It will be of interest to those setting up a WIL program for the first time, keen to learn about some of the challenges in doing so and strategies for mitigation.

Keywords: business, employment, stakeholder engagement, sustainability, WIL
Introduction

Work integrated learning (WIL), as recognised by the University of Tasmania (UTAS) is defined broadly, as ‘a purposeful, organised, supervised and assessed educational activity that integrates theoretical learning with its applications in the workplace.’ (UTAS, Work Integrated Learning Policy, 2011). As an example of WIL, The Faculty of Business Corporate Internship Program was established in 2007, in response to pressures within Australia’s dynamic higher education environment. Cooper, *et al.*, (2010) refer to these pressures, as the “new enterprise in higher education.” Mass education and fiscal constraints have contributed to the marketisation of Australia’s tertiary institutions and impacted the need for delivery of teaching and quality learning experiences beyond the more traditional domain of lectures and tutorials. Australia’s knowledge-based, information-dependent economy has fuelled a need for graduates to be workforce-ready following graduation. To meet this need, collaborations between industry and the academy have emerged as the complementary platform from which university students acquire specialised, industry-specific and generic skills. Freudenberg, *et al.*, (2011), have shown it is important both sets of the aforementioned skills are developed, as, traditional learning outcomes with a focus on discipline-specific knowledge only, do not guarantee graduate employment.

At UTAS, the desire for graduate outcomes to align with business objectives through WIL partnerships, was endorsed at an institutional level in 2011, with the release of the *UTAS Work Integrated Learning Policy* (May 2011), and incorporated into the University’s strategic plan in 2012. (*University of Tasmania Open To Talent: Strategic Plan 2012 – Onwards*). Despite approval at the highest level from within the organisation, learning and teaching partnerships between business and the academy can be risky ventures, and need to be carefully managed to ensure successful outcomes for all participants. This is an important consideration in Tasmania, an island state with a relatively small population, where business
organisations share knowledge with each other of their experience with the state’s single university, particularly with regard to graduate outcomes associated with learning and teaching opportunities offered by the Faculty of Business.

Discussion

This paper will offer a thematic analysis of salient issues encountered in initiating, and maintaining, successful business-academy relations throughout the development of the Faculty of Business Corporate Internship Program (CIP). The CIP has a distinctive program management structure which has had a positive impact on the level of engagement by all stakeholders, the quality and longevity of partnerships with Tasmanian business organisations, the quality of internship offerings, student learning and business outcomes. Several themes involving major challenges associated with WIL program management will be discussed, including: stakeholder engagement, risk management, quality assurance and sustainability. Although these challenges are common to many WIL programs (Billet: 2001; Patrick, et al (2008); Cooper, et al, 2010; Orrell: 2011), in this paper, each challenge and strategies for mitigation, are considered in the context of the UTAS business curriculum.

CIP Typology

In collaboration with Tasmanian business organisations, the CIP provides a unique, individually tailored Work Integrated Learning (WIL) experience for students, enrolled in degrees or combined degrees in the Faculty of Business at the University of Tasmania. The internship offers undergraduates and selected postgraduate students an accredited unit(s) of study (non-compulsory) in which some of the learning takes place in a corporate environment. In this way theory is integrated with the practice of work in a purposefully-designed curriculum. The internship, which can take place with either a public, private or not-for-profit business organisation, in a physical and/or virtual corporate environment, provides a positive
and powerful learning experience for a student. Students’ skills and capabilities are tested through engagement in authentic work-based projects and related tasks that link their academic studies to corporate practice and facilitate a realistic appreciation of diverse business environments. Students enhance and/or acquire UTAS graduate and other attributes by undertaking stimulating, work-based projects valued by a business. In addition, they develop important professional networks and personal strategies for managing themselves and their future careers.

The semester-based internship is unpaid, and equivalent to one, two, or four units of study (i.e., BAA322, BAA323, BAA708 are each weighted at 12.5% of a fulltime study load; BAA321 and BAA709 are each weighted at 25%; and, BAA320 is weighted at 50%). The weighting of the unit available to a student will depend on the degree studied and the internship project requirements.

The internship is completed in conjunction with the student’s other study commitments on a semester basis at either one, two or four days per week for 13 weeks during normal business hours. Over the Spring/Summer period the internship is offered at the equivalent of two days per week for 6.5 weeks.

The internship project and related tasks will be directly related to one or more of the student’s majors to facilitate an authentic connection between theory and practice.

The student will be physically located in a workplace (unless working with their mentor in a virtual environment) and suitability for specific work projects is determined in collaboration with the business offering the internship (via an interview), the School Internship Coordinator and/or the Program Director, and the student.

To be eligible to undertake a corporate internship, any student can apply provided they meet the academic eligibility requirements. They must be able to fit the internship elective(s) into their enrolment and overall degree structure in the semester in which the
placement is being offered, and, have passed at an acceptable level, sufficient study units applicable to the requirements of the internship project.

Internship Business Organisation Requirements

Mentor – the business organisation provides a suitable staff person/s to mentor the student, provide guidance to them in the workplace during the internship, and assist with workplace assessment using a proforma developed by the Faculty.

Access – the business organisation provides access to suitable facilities, equipment, personnel and information necessary for the student to successfully complete their project and/or related business tasks.

Stakeholder Engagement

Engaging stakeholders successfully is a key factor in setting up and sustaining any WIL program (Lawson, et al, 2011; Cooper, et al, 2012; Stefani, 2009). It is particularly significant for a work-based, business-oriented WIL program such as the CIP.

One of the first challenges in setting up the CIP was engaging participants from the business community. There were concerns that limited employment opportunities in Tasmania would be replicated by limited internship opportunities for students.

To facilitate engagement, a combination of marketing strategies was deployed in the first instance that could be applied to all stakeholders. A website for the CIP was developed in the first year of operation to facilitate access by students, academics and business organisations to a suite of common services and shared information. This was driven by demand for specific information requests from business organisations and students, and avoided the need for duplicated written and telephone responses by the Program Director. Information was centred round procedures for accepting internship project proposals, prospective internship
applications, and included information about available internships, general details with regard to Program objectives, course information and unit outlines. PDFs have been the preferred method for conveying dynamic information such as unit outlines and Program details, as they can be updated easily and uploaded to the website as required. Online proformas were developed for submitting internship business project proposals and student applications. Details contained in the aforementioned were structured to streamline the academic approval process. Information available on the website was augmented over time for marketing purposes and in response to stakeholder demand and included details of previous internships, testimonials, photographs (many of which were taken by interns and mentors themselves) and a link to the University’s Careers website. Tasmanian Chambers of Commerce also created links from their websites to the CIP website.

Business-Community Engagement

To facilitate engagement by business organisations and promote the Program, during the first two years an event was held each semester on alternating campuses. The events were held after hours, to maximise attendance by the business community. These events, known as Business After Hours events (BAHs) were hosted in conjunction with Tasmanian Chambers of Commerce in both the North and South of the State. BAHs attracted between 80-100 participants each time. The Chambers of Commerce liaised with local businesses to provide refreshments at each event and assist with associated running costs. After two years of hosting BAHs, over 100 Tasmanian business organisations had participated in the Program and news of its benefits had gone viral. This alleviated the need to host events each semester and they were reduced to one event only, every two years. Facilitating engagement by the business community and students has been further strengthened by the internship process itself, which ensures commitment by all participants at the outset. See diagram below.
Student Engagement

Engaging students in the CIP required execution of a number of different marketing initiatives. In addition to information provided on the CIP website, facilitating involvement by students was achieved by holding information sessions for prospective interns on the largest of the three UTAS campuses located in the South of the State, which were then video-linked to the two other campuses located in the North, and on the North-West coast, respectively. The Dean was very supportive of the CIP from its inception and keen to lend his name to bulk emails promoting the Program to students.

Marketing the CIP to students was relatively easy in the early stages as students were keen to engage with a new learning environment. They also assumed (incorrectly) that an internship
would be reminiscent of their mostly, passive work experience undertaken during their secondary schooling, and provide them with an easy learning option. It took one semester only of successfully completed internships for students to realise corporate internships study units were aimed at self-directed learners and required considerable effort on their part to meet business expectations and achieve desired academic outcomes. Nevertheless, by participating in the CIP, benefits to students were immediately obvious and warranted further interest.

The internship project is individually tailored to complement and/or augment graduate attributes the student has acquired during their university studies (and elsewhere) and relates to at least one of their majors. This is a deliberate strategy to ensure the student:

- is aware of the importance of UTAS graduate attributes (knowledge, problem solving skills, communication, social responsibility, global perspective);
- can critically reflect on the attributes they have acquired, or will acquire, during their degree in the Faculty of Business;
- gains skills, capabilities and knowledge relating to their degree and area of interest in an environment that correlates with their intended career path; and,
- can make a positive contribution to a Tasmanian business organisation.

Solicited feedback from questionnaires and online Discussion Posts by first and subsequent intakes of interns revealed a number of recurrent themes with regard to advantages of Program participation. Self-confidence, application of university studies to the corporate environment, deeper understanding of academic theory and its relation to corporate practice, networking opportunities, critical analysis of career plans, and personal and professional development have been cited as the most common benefits derived from Program
participation. Employment with a host business organisation following completion of an internship was a desired outcome for many international students.

Academic Engagement
The greatest challenge in the early stages of the CIP involved engaging academics, many of whom were sceptical of WIL program deliverables and its non-traditional format for learning and teaching. The structure and management of the CIP represented a significant deviation from established Faculty norms. A professional UTAS staff member recruited from outside the Faculty, was tasked with responsibility for creation and overall management of the Program. A new Program directed by an unknown, non-academic (though well-qualified) Program Director, was perceived by many academics, as a huge risk. Clearly, academics’ support was a crucial enabler in being able to establish the CIP as a legitimate foundation from which to offer business students a unique, authentic, learning experience. Without academic support, the credibility of an internship as a valuable learning exercise for students would be undermined.

It was important at the outset to secure support of ‘champions’, staff from within the Faculty who were supportive of Program aims. The Program Director concluded support would be easier to secure if academics were directly involved in approval of internship projects and development of the student assessment rubric. The conclusion proved correct. The Program’s credibility was further strengthened when it was determined the focus of teaching and learning inputs and outcomes should be academic, rather than career-based, hence resumes and interviews completed as part of the internship application process were deemed non-assessable components of corporate internship study unit(s). Emphasis would be on linking academic theory to corporate practice, with direct reference to the interns’ study units: a very challenging exercise for students, but one that would allow them to understand the
applicability and limitations of university studies in preparing them for corporate practice. The process of academic acceptance took some time, nevertheless, after the first two semesters of operation, the benefits of the Program to students, the Faculty, and the Tasmanian business community could not be ignored or regarded as a stroke of luck.

This change in attitude coincided with an emphasis by UTAS and other Australian universities on strengthening business partnerships and furthering opportunities for community engagement. As part of the Australian federal government’s higher education enterprise agenda, WIL was perceived as an ideal process for facilitating partnerships, to address skills shortages with a supply of work-ready graduates and meet future needs of Australian and international labour markets (Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report (2008); Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System (2009). Challenges previously met by individuals at a program level, were immediately thrust into the spotlight nationally, as overarching, institutional concerns worthy of specific policy-development, infrastructure and resources (Cooper, et al, 2010; Orrell, 2011).

**Risk Management and Quality assurance**

**Program Structure**

Setting up a WIL program involves contending with numerous, well-documented, risks that need to be carefully managed, including: discrimination, quality assurance in relation to workplace supervision, assessment and WIL opportunities, maintaining standards involved in duty of care, student competency and preparedness, managing stakeholder expectations, and university policies and procedures (Cooper, et al, 2010; Patrick, et al, 2008). With regard to the above, ensuring a quality WIL experience for all CIP participants has fostered an
Striking the correct balance between WIL enablers and impediments can be tricky (Lawson et al, 2011). When the CIP commenced in 2007, UTAS did not have a formally-endorsed up-to-date position with regard to WIL. The lack of a current UTAS WIL policy and guiding principles meant WIL programs at UTAS were vulnerable. Faculties had developed their own, independent procedures for managing risk and quality assurance obligations, specific to their discipline area and related industry needs.

In 2010, the Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching (CALT) at UTAS, commenced work on ‘The WIL Project’ to develop a new Work Integrated Learning (WIL) Policy (Freeman, 2011). The UTAS Work Integrated Learning Policy was mandated in 2011, providing comprehensive guidelines for managing WIL and meeting legislative requirements in relation to higher education support, student learning, career development learning, equity, community engagement, insurance, conflict of interest, coordination/management of WIL placements, quality assurance, risk management, disability discrimination, Workplace Health and Safety (WHS), occupational health and safety, academic standards, intellectual property and student discipline, (UTAS Work Integrated Learning (WIL) Policy, 2011).

At a Business Faculty level, the UTAS WIL Policy affirmed the robustness of procedures already in place within the CIP. It also highlighted a deficiency that was not immediately apparent, and therefore not identified as a risk in the early stages of Program development. By the time UTAS WIL Policy was formally endorsed in 2011, several changes had occurred within the CIP that involved significant risk. As stakeholder confidence in the CIP grew, the
kinds of WIL opportunities offered to business students became more adventurous, and their locations more exotic. Exciting tourism, business management and marketing-related internships became available with business organisations such as the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service, regional (rural) councils and agribusinesses in locations around the State at considerable distances from major cities and towns. Suddenly, risks of snake-bite, exposure to uncommon hazards such as native animals, plants and travel-related incidents were possibilities that needed to be taken into consideration. There was no risk assessment process in place for CIP interns required to travel large distances to remote locations or exposed to unusual hazards not encountered in city-based, office environments. The new UTAS WIL Policy provided guidelines for managing such risks together with a proforma for specific adaptation by WIL managers.

Student Learning

Corporate Internships comprise carefully constructed work-based projects. They are created by business organisations using an online proforma developed by the CIP team. However, as Blumenfeld, et al, (1991) contend, project-based learning is unlikely to be successful unless constructed in such a way that with appropriate guidance, the projects themselves generate and sustain student motivation and thoughtfulness. Furthermore, they claim student interest in project-based learning is enhanced when tasks are varied and include novel elements; the problem is authentic and perceived by the student to have value; the project is challenging and finite, resulting in creation of an artefact; there is choice about how and what is to be achieved; and, there are opportunities to work with others. Balancing desired pedagogical outcomes with student interest in their WIL project, has required internship projects to be structured in close alignment with CIP objectives to maximise the learning experience for students, meet business needs, and connect with the assessment rubric.
Provision of an authentic learning experience complemented by appropriate forms of assessment has been the subject of much debate in the literature (Cooper, et al, 2010; Patrick, et al, 2008). Determination of appropriate forms of assessment and linking them to desired student learning outcomes in the CIP has proven to be a challenge. Obtaining consistency when assessing the work of a diverse range of students, from different though related-study backgrounds, each completing unique internship projects with differing skill requirements, has been the subject most often discussed and subject to most frequent refinement in the CIP.

With a view to continuous improvement in all aspects of Program development, a review of the CIP is conducted at the conclusion of each academic year by the Program Director and academics closely involved with the Program. Together with solicited (via surveys and online discussion) and unsolicited feedback from student and business participants, suggestions and recommendations for improvement are incorporated into the Program, which is constantly evolving to meet business needs and desired student learning outcomes.

**Sustainability**

Emphasis in the CIP has always been on the quality of potential internship experiences. This vision has served the Program well, with both Tasmanian business organisations and UTAS business students fully aware that the aim of the Program is to facilitate the best possible outcomes for all participants. In 2011, the CIP received formal recognition from UTAS for its contribution to student learning, and workplace and community engagement with a Vice-Chancellor’s Award. The award enhanced the value of participation by all stakeholders and encouraged them to continue supporting the Program. Despite the accolade, there are many challenges in sustaining the CIP. Adequate resourcing, stakeholder engagement and offering
a WIL business curriculum that is adaptable to changing academic and business needs are commonly cited areas of concern for work-based learning programs (Cooper, et al, 2010, Patrick, et al, 2008, Boud and Solomon, 2001).

To date, resources for the CIP have been scarce in what can only be described a very labour-intensive enterprise. Much of the extra work required has been undertaken with a fair degree of goodwill by the Program Director. Passion for the job has no financial value, yet has been an essential ingredient in sustaining the Program. WIL is frequently regarded as the ‘poor cousin’ in academic circles with funding preferences being directed towards research in areas where there is proven capacity to draw in much needed capital. The CIP has thrived regardless, evidence of the effectiveness of the current Program management structure. It will continue to grow provided there is sufficient support from senior management.

Securing participation by well-informed, appropriately-skilled stakeholders has also contributed to the CIP’s success. Managing stakeholder expectations is a particularly important factor in the Tasmanian corporate environment, where many of the participants are known to each other and in regular communication. In this context, a less than ideal internship experience by a business organisation and/or student could have an immediate, adverse impact on the future of the Program.

Empowering the business organisation and student applicant to be final arbiters in choosing whether or not to proceed working together on an internship project (ref: diagram above), ensures commitment to CIP objectives at the outset and has mitigated many potential problems (e.g., lack of engagement with and/or commitment to the internship project). Close monitoring of intern and business mentor by the CIP Director at every stage of the internship,
facilitates regular communications between all parties and further mitigates escalation of problems should they arise. A placement visit by the Program Director in the middle of the three month internship period has proven a valuable exercise in identifying potential issues and being able to diplomatically discuss these in an informal setting (the placement visit does not form part of an intern’s assessment).

In the first year of the CIP, a lack of cultural awareness by a small sector of the Tasmanian business community needed to be addressed. Some Tasmanian businesses were sceptical about working with interns from overseas, especially those lacking prior knowledge of Australian corporate culture. To remedy this, the Faculty of Business commenced offering relevant study units at postgraduate level (BAA711 Workplace Attributes and BAA702 Engaging with the Global Workplace), with the knowledge that many newly-arrived, postgraduates from a non-English speaking background would be interested in applying for corporate internships in the final year of their degree. Despite initial reluctance by the Tasmanian business community to engage with international learners, the realisation that participation in the CIP represented a relatively low risk to the business (unlike paid employment), and carried no financial burden (corporate internships are unpaid), the situation was reversed fairly quickly with an acquired understanding that business students who were eligible to participate in the CIP, were also highly capable and keen to make their contribution to the Tasmanian community.

With regard to sustaining the CIP into the future, development of a learning culture in the Faculty of Business at UTAS via participation in the Program, has come full circle. At the conclusion of each semester, many interns go on to paid employment with the organisations that hosted them. Securing employment at the end of an internship is not mandated as it
would be risky in an island State that also has the highest rate of unemployment in the country. (ABS, 2013). For interns who choose to remain in Tasmania at the conclusion of their degrees, it is important they retain positive, memorable experiences of their internships. In recent years, a number of former interns from the first two years of the CIP cohort and now occupying middle and senior management positions with well-known, Tasmanian businesses, have been instrumental in encouraging their organisations to offer internship projects and have taken it upon themselves to mentor new generations of corporate interns. Added to the number of organisations who repeatedly take UTAS business interns, the latter have made a significant contribution to the sustainability of the Program. Former business mentors, who have moved on to key roles with some of Tasmania’s peak industry bodies, have also been highly effective at leveraging further internship opportunities in the organisations they represent.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, stakeholder engagement has emerged as the salient theme. Several main challenges associated with the management and structure of the CIP to engage stakeholders have been explored. In addition to providing an academic challenge for students and meeting the needs of business, the CIP has fostered a learning culture in which the social value of business, the role of government, individual responsibility and collective accountability are critically examined in relation to participants’ beliefs, values and goals. The CIP has facilitated a learning environment in which our future business leaders and thinkers recognise the importance of higher order thinking in dynamic social, political and economic conditions. Importantly, for Faculty of Business students (and aspiring future managers), the direction of contemporary UTAS management is favourable for integrative learning opportunities such as those offered by the Corporate Internship Program. WIL is now recognised by business
leaders and academics as one of the most effective ways to improve skills, increase productivity and change corporate structures to better serve communities (Choy, et al, 2009). Tasmania’s current and future, economic and social development depends on the contributions of well-trained, productive citizens.

References:


