

# CHAPTER 6

## What makes a good student placement: Recognising the importance of people

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### ABSTRACT

Student placements have a long history in higher education. Despite the documented benefits of placements and work-integrated learning more broadly, there is very little scholarship addressing multiple stakeholders' perspectives on placement quality. Thirty-seven stakeholders (university staff, students and host supervisors) were asked to describe the top three things that, in their view, made a good student placement. Responses were thematically analysed using a grounded theory approach. Student skills and attributes, host attributes and supervision, relationships and communication, and matching and alignment (relating to expectations and stakeholder needs) were key areas identified. Results clearly show that people factors, particularly hosts and students, are perceived to be the most important in making a good placement. Practical and research implications are discussed.

**KEYWORDS** higher education, student placements, qualitative research, stakeholder perceptions, work-integrated learning

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### INTRODUCTION

Student placements, as a part of work-integrated learning (WIL), have a long history in higher education. WIL is now an integral part of university business, which, inter alia, seeks to improve the work-readiness of higher education graduates (Patrick et al., 2008). Despite the benefits of placements and WIL more broadly (Harvey, Geall, & Moon, 1998; Keating, Jeffries, Glaisher & Milne, 2010; Patrick et al., 2008; Weisz & Smith, 2005), there is very little scholarship addressing multiple stakeholders' perspectives on placement quality, particularly the factors that contribute to successful placements.

Available findings tend to fall within four broad areas. 'Placement characteristics' provide the focus of much of the literature, with well-designed placements aligning with student's coursework, thought to promote better student outcomes (Keating et al., 2010; Patrick et al., 2008; Smith, 2012; Smith, Mackay, Challis, & Holt, 2006). 'Communication and effective partnerships' emphasise the importance of open relationships, responsive communication and good working relationships between stakeholders (Keating et al., 2010; Roger, Fitzgerald,

Davila, Millar, & Allison, 2011). 'Pedagogical practices' refer to the need for WIL to be underpinned by reflective practices and supported by scaffolding (Keating et al., 2010; Martin & Leberman, 2005; Weisz & Smith, 2005). 'Resourcing', emphasises the need for adequate resource allocation, funding and opportunities (Patrick et al., 2008; Weisz & Smith, 2005). The aim of this paper is to identify key features of a good placement as perceived by a range of WIL stakeholders. This research is part of a larger study exploring stakeholder perspectives of WIL (Rowe, Mackaway, & Winchester-Seeto, 2012; Winchester-Seeto, Rowe, & Mackaway, 2013).

## METHOD

Participants were asked to describe the top three things that, in their view, made a good student placement. Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face, via the telephone or in a focus group. The interviewees, from one Australian university, represented several disciplines (e.g., business, early childhood, psychology) with a variety of different placement lengths and practices. The cohort included a majority of host (workplace) supervisors ( $n=22$ ), as well as academic and professional university staff ( $n=9$ ) and students ( $n=6$ ). Interviews were transcribed and uploaded into QSR NVivo 9 for coding and analysis.

A grounded theory approach was used for coding themes that emerged from the interview data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). An inductive and iterative approach was chosen because little is known about the views of stakeholders on this topic (Patton, 2002). Emerging themes were reviewed and refined over several cycles, and grouped into three key categories: *People*, *Placement* and *Matching and Alignment*.

Table 1 lists the number of interviewees (sources) and the number of times a particular theme was mentioned (coding references). The table includes the percentage of all participants who mentioned the theme (e.g., 35% of 37 sources mentioned *relationships and communication*) and all material that was coded for a theme (e.g., 10% of 189 coding references refer to *relationships and communication*). The number of coding references serves as a proxy of the importance of the theme.

**Table 1. Themes as measured by number of sources and coding references**

Key themes No.	No. sources (N=37)	% of total sources	No. coding references (N=189)	% of total coding references
<b>People</b>				
Student attributes, skills and knowledge	22	60%	35	19%
Host attributes and supervision	15	41%	26	14%
Relationships and communication	13	35%	19	10%
Workplace organisation and culture	9	24%	10	5%
				<b>48%</b>
<b>Placement</b>				
Authentic and meaningful placement	12	32%	16	9%
Placement planning, design and time	9	24%	12	6%
Mutually beneficial	8	22%	11	6%
Support for student learning	2	5%	5	2%
				<b>23%</b>
<b>Matching and alignment</b>				
Expectations and commitment	10	27%	21	11%
Stakeholder attributes, interests, needs	15	41%	16	8%
Placement and coursework	9	24%	13	7%
Host/placement requirements/student skills	5	14%	5	3%
				<b>29%</b>

## RESULTS

Of the three categories used to group themes, *People* accounts for just under half of the coding references (48%), followed by *Matching and Alignment* at 29%. The following quote emphasises this point:

*"First and foremost the people, the people that you know and the people you don't know and the people you get to know."* (Student D)

Somewhat surprising, given the prominence in the literature, is that less than one quarter of coding references refer to aspects of *Placement* (23%) in the top three things that made a good placement.

Student attributes, skills and knowledge is clearly a significant theme, referred to by 60% of the interviewees and is the most common aspect mentioned, accounting for 19% of all coded comments. Student attributes include qualities such as having a positive attitude, showing interest and enthusiasm, a willingness to learn and engage. Student skills are predominantly generic skills such as team work, reflection, organisation, initiative, as demonstrated in this quotation.

*"[a student] who is willing and capable. Don't necessarily have to be genius level. But they do have to have a fairly good street intelligence."* (Host supervisor P)

Host attributes and supervision is the second most frequently cited theme (14%) and is included by 41% of interviewees. Host attributes include: having a positive attitude, being knowledgeable, flexible and patient, and demonstrating an understanding of student diversity. Aspects of supervision such as being accessible and available to the student, providing feedback, and guiding and supporting students featured strongly, especially with students.

*"constant feedback...confirmation that what you're doing is good."* (Student E)

Many interviewees highlighted matching and alignment factors in successful placements. There is however, no clear agreement on what needs to be matched or aligned. More interviewees mention matching attributes, interests and needs of the student and host supervisor or organisation (41%), but the interviewees talked more about the matching and alignment of expectations and commitment (11%). Differences may be related to different WIL models and practices, and may also reflect specific prior experiences of the interviewees. Although all aspects may need alignment, it would be useful to know if careful matching of one or two aspects had a bigger impact on ensuring successful placements.

*"I think what makes a good placement...is really commitment by all parties. So that the host supervisor really wanted to contribute; they had the time and they had the knowledge of what was expected of them."* (University staff A)

Interviewees also indicated that placements can't flourish without close and productive relationships based on communication (35% of sources), supporting other research (e.g., Keating et al., 2010; Roger et al., 2011). The relationships mentioned are predominantly between hosts and students, but academics are also mentioned in this section for the first time. The fifth most common theme mentions placements that are authentic and meaningful, and this echoes the findings of many studies (e.g., Harvey et al., 1998; Smith, 2012). It is, however, surprising that in terms of both number of sources, and coding references that this is the first mention of any aspect of placement design.

Other factors that make a good placement, but are much less commonly mentioned can be viewed in Table 1. Interestingly there is very little mention of academics and the university. This may be influenced by the larger number of host supervisors amongst the interviewees. Previous work (Winchester-Seeto et al., 2013) shows that hosts have very little understanding of the work that academics and professional staff do, especially in education and support of students.

## DISCUSSION

The results clearly show that factors around the people involved in WIL, particularly hosts and students, are perceived to be the most important in making a good placement. The outcomes of a good placement, however, may vary in the eyes of different stakeholders and this may explain some of the differences that occur in the literature and in this study.

The higher number of host participants may have contributed to the strong emphasis on student attributes. Hosts might be more likely to emphasise student abilities/skills than other stakeholders, because of a lack of knowledge or awareness of other aspects of the placement such as curriculum design. Because of this sample bias, care needs to be taken in interpreting these findings.

Themes found by Rodger et al. (2011) and Smith et al. (2006) also feature in our research (Table 2). It should be noted however, that within these themes there are differences. Rodger et al. (2011) mention student skills, but their focus is on the preparation of disciplinary skills, whereas our data highlights student attributes and generic skills. There are also a number of themes that do not appear in our research, including a consistent approach and expectations between supervisors (Rodger et al., 2011). This can mostly be explained by the nature of the particular discipline and the kind of placement model explored by Rodger et al. (2011). Differences between our findings and other studies (e.g., the lack of reference to detailed orientation in our data) may also be an artefact of disciplinary variations in placement models and terminology differences. Slightly different emphases in the questions asked by researchers may also have contributed to the disparities.

**Table 2. Comparison of our themes with similar studies**

Themes from our research	Comparable themes from other studies
Student attributes, skills and knowledge	Student skills <sup>a</sup>
Host attributes and supervision	Supervisor experience and skills; Quality feedback <sup>a</sup>
Relationships and communication	Open honest relationships <sup>a</sup>
Alignment of stakeholder attributes, interests, needs	
Authentic and meaningful placement	Purposeful work; focused work; variety <sup>b</sup>
Alignment of expectations and commitment	<i>[Detailed orientation]</i> and clear expectations <sup>a</sup>
Workplace organisation and culture	Welcoming learning environment <sup>a</sup>
Placement planning, design and time	
Alignment of placement and coursework	Learning (technical training, business processes/ generic skills) <sup>b</sup>
Mutually beneficial	
Alignment of host/placement requirements and student skills	
Support for student learning	University preparation and placement procedures <sup>a</sup>
	Graded program of learning experiences; Quality modelling and practice; Consistent approach and expectations (between supervisors) <sup>a</sup>
	Risk taking; Enhanced employability <sup>b</sup>

**Note:** Italicised text refers to themes not identified in our findings; a= Rodger et al., 2011; b = Smith et al., 2006.

Resourcing and student support were barely mentioned by participants in our research, despite several recent reports and academic papers highlighting the need for adequate resource allocation and funding (Patrick et al., 2008; Weisz & Smith, 2005). Similarly our study showed a comparative lack of emphasis on reflective practice in WIL discussed in other studies (Keating et al., 2010; Martin & Leberman, 2005). These findings might be the result of the sample being dominated by host supervisors. Alternatively, in the case of resourcing, it could be that funding was adequate and so was not identified.

There are a number of practical and research implications. For example, our findings can inform student (or indeed host) preparation programs, e.g., to raise student's awareness of the importance of showing interest and engagement, as well as developing their teamwork and organisational skills. In terms of research, matching, while promoted strongly in literature, is largely anecdotal and there is little direct evidence supporting its effectiveness. More research is needed in to evaluate the value of matching in WIL, and to determine which aspects of matching are most important.

## CONCLUSION

This research reinforces the importance of host supervisors, supervision and the relationship between host supervisors and students as crucial components of a successful placement. It contrasts previous research in demonstrating that student attributes, as well as skills and knowledge are also critical to placement success. These results point to the necessity of spending time not only on preparing the activities and designing the placement but, perhaps even more importantly, on the preparation of the individuals involved.

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