

Addressing the weak link: enhancing support for the sponsors of student placements in cooperative education

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This paper reports the findings of a research project designed to enhance the relationship of a tertiary education provider with the work-based supervisors of student placements in a cooperative education program. The first phase of the research project surveyed these supervisors regarding their experiences and perceptions of the co-op program. Whilst the responses were generally positive, most work-based supervisors felt that the university could improve its support and communication. When asked how their co-op experience could be improved, most work-based supervisors agreed that an orientation regarding the purpose and content of the cooperative education process would strengthen their contribution to the program. Subsequently, to better inform the content and style of delivery of a training package as well as exploring in greater depth the perceptions and requirements of participation in the co-op program, interviews were conducted. Thus work-based supervisors had the opportunity to contribute to the development of more effective and substantial links with the university and have input into the design of the orientation package. The findings suggested that links with the University were perceived as tenuous, and the organizational aspects of the program were somewhat "loose". The role of the supervisor required further explication and the match of student and placement more careful consideration. This paper reviews the relevant literature, presents the findings of the project and outlines how the research enhanced the development of strong and mutually supportive relationships with the work-based supervisors in a co-op program. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 2008, 9(2), 91-111.

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A crucial component of cooperative education programs is the partnerships amongst the workplace, the tertiary education provider and the student (Groenewald, 2004). It is these relationships which facilitate a quality learning experience for the students as well as contributing to the development of the workplace. This triangular relationship has specified responsibilities and should be beneficial to all parties. It should be characterized by good communication and close collaboration. However, this aspect of the co-op process is often not addressed, including in the School of Social Sciences of AUT University, the focus of this work. Historically, no records had been maintained in the School of organizations that previously hosted student placements so new and inexperienced work-based supervisors are found each year. Most other work-based learning programs have established relationships with appropriate workplaces which build the capability of organizations to provide a performance-enhancing placement for students (Boud et al., 2001). Additionally, if students use their own networks to find placements, there may be infrequent contact between the co-op or placement coordinator, the academic supervisor, and work-based supervisors in the initial stages of a co-op placement. Likewise, it is often the student who establishes the relationship with the work-based supervisor. This is considered a constructive and appropriate approach in terms of students' development of job seeking skills. However, the procedure precludes direct communication with the university-based co-op staff and limits the provision of adequate support from the university. Although this limited contact characterizes the university/work-based supervisor relationship, much is expected of work-based supervisors and their input is substantial. They are expected to negotiate the learning contract and provide students with meaningful work and direction. They must organize

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challenging tasks to support the student's achievement of learning aims and provide feedback about the student's performance. Work-based supervisors also have to ensure that students have fulfilling placements and their guidance is essential to students' completion of the co-op program requirements.

Responses to previous survey research at AUT University suggest that work-based supervisors feel challenged by their co-op role and responsibilities as work-based mentors. There was also a strong indication that improvement was necessary in the School of Social Sciences' support and communication. To ensure that experience was positive and constructive for all three partners in work-based learning, further research involving individual interviews of work-based supervisors was required.

COOPERATIVE EDUCATION – A DEFINITION

Cooperative education is defined by Groenewald (2004) as "a structured educational strategy integrating classroom studies with learning through productive work experiences in a field related to a student's academic or career goals. It provides progressive experiences in integrating theory with practice" (p. 17). Groenewald identified four core dimensions in cooperative education, and the dimension of relevance to this research project is the "cultivation of a support base" (p. 24). This refers to the development of a pool of loyal, experienced and enthusiastic work-based supervisors. Other researchers add that co-op programs should promote linkages between "the world of tertiary professional education, the world of work-based learning and the world of student experience" to ensure that there is a shared vision and interactions are effective (see, e.g., Alderman & Milne, 2005, p. vii).

THE ROLE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE WORK-BASED SUPERVISORS

There is general agreement that the role of work-based supervisors is crucial to the success of co-op. Apostolides and Looye (1997) identified some factors which influence the quality of students' co-op experiences, and comment that successful learning results from having "quality supervision, a sense of contribution to projects and challenging assignments" (p. 27). Evans (2001) adds the level of interest and commitment of the work-based supervisor as influential factors. Bartkus and Stull (2004), likewise explored work-based supervisors' perceptions in a USA-based survey of co-op programs to inform the development of a needs-based training program which would emphasize the development of the most important co-op competencies. These perceptions included: selecting students who will best meet the organization's needs, initial orientation to the workplace, giving informal feedback regarding the students' performance and ensuring their skills were utilized in constructive tasks (2001). Their findings suggest that the inclusion of these competencies in co-op programs would enhance the quality of outcomes for both students and supervisors.

The literature also pays considerable attention to the work-based supervisors' mentoring relationship with students. Alderman and Milne (2005), for example, comment that this means more than simply providing a work project or supervision of students. They observe that the relationship requires "taking the students into organizations as members of workplace teams, assisting their socialization into the organizations, devising plans that facilitate customized learning experiences, and giving feedback that will allow students to reflect on their own learning and development" (p. 31). Work-based supervisors are also described as potential role models who set an example for the student. They should model professional workplace conduct and values in their interactions with students as well as

providing challenge and support. Their role is to provide “guidance and inspiration” (Alderman & Milne, p. 3). Wiseman concurs, adding that work-based supervisors provide the opportunity for students to demonstrate their professionalism. Their brief is to help students develop an occupational work ethic and expose students to practical problem solving (2001).

Researchers such as King (2001) observe that whilst the interdependence of student and work-based supervisor has been researched, scant attention has been paid to the role of the individual, work-based supervisor. King sees this role as similar to that of a teacher, and suggests that an effective work-based supervisor has “a profile of teacher attributes, broadly interprets the student’s job and cultivates a dynamic relationship beyond work performance” (p. 17). The work-based supervisor is thus described by King as “the critical link” and a “change agent” who contributes to the student’s professional development (p. 18). King confirms the complexity of this challenging role when he suggests that they should bring “breadth and depth to the conventional supervisor functions: their diverse learning measures blend aspects of mentor, advisor, counselor, not to mention facilitator and problem solver” (p. 23).

QUALITY OF UNIVERSITY/WORK-BASED SUPERVISOR COMMUNICATION

The literature affirms that the establishment of more frequent and constructive communication between the university and workplace supervisors in co-op programs is required in some institutions. Making more effort in this regard is endorsed by Chapman et al. (1999) who report satisfaction levels with a university’s co-op service quality are restricted by several important variables: limited support in the student selection process in terms of achieving the right match of student and placement; lack of clarity in the role of academic supervisors and lack of placement support for students when they most need it. Alderman and Milne (2005) also see quality communication as an essential component for “the effective operation of the [co-op] model” (p. 57). Other work suggests that problems arise when co-op programs tend to be conducted in an unstructured and loosely organized fashion or when academic institutions are perceived as ambivalent (Hyman-Parker & Smith, 1998).

A favored strategy to enhance the degree of collaboration required for effective co-op education programs is workplace visits by the placement coordinator or academic supervisors either mid-term or preferably more frequently (Hodges, Smith & Jones, 2004; Hyman-Parker & Smith, 1998). An alternative is an exchange of emails or a more substantial report of the student’s progress. The creation of a co-op advisory board representative of the three co-op partners is suggested by Boud, Solomon and Symes (2001), who also recommend a less formal social occasion which may bring the partners together for a constructive exchange of ideas and experiences.

TRAINING AND SUPPORT FOR WORK-BASED SUPERVISORS

Mayo (2004), with reference to IBM’s enhancement of their cooperative education program, recommends the development of a web page which showcases successes and challenges of students in the workplace, and that features a regular newsletter and provides on-line support for work-based supervisors. IBM also developed a “toolkit” model which includes components such as the student evaluation form, a description of the attributes of co-op, a contact form to complete with student, academic supervisor and coordinator details, an introduction to the website and a “just in time” checklist. A template of tasks is included

which provides an “early, comprehensive view of the [organization’s] culture, people, products, services and opportunities” (Mayo, 2004, p. 263).

Chapman et al. (1999) identified some new areas of service for work-based supervisors: the provision of a database of all available students; sending a letter before the placement commences confirming the appointment and starting date; the establishment of a confidentiality agreement between the university and organization; provision of a detailed description of the placement tasks prior to placement; seminars in which employers could discuss their research interests and skill requirements; and the establishment of scholarships that could be used to promote research in certain area. However, variables across co-op programs, such as length of the work-based placement and availability of resources, influence the extent to which such additional services could be implemented.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

The paper “cooperative education” is a 30-credit, year-long core paper in the School of Social Sciences, AUT University, New Zealand. It is undertaken by students majoring in Social Sciences or Psychology in the final year of their Bachelor of Arts studies. The paper is considered the capstone of their degrees, as students apply the skills and knowledge they have acquired to work-based practice and develop capabilities as autonomous learners. A workshop series informs the development of individual career plans and job seeking skills. Preparatory topics such as reflective practice and research and business ethics are addressed. Students also document all aspects of their co-op experience for the entirety of the process in a reflective journal. The key outcome of the paper is to integrate the content of students’ degrees with learning through productive learning experiences in a field related to their academic, personal and career goals. This involves placing approximately 60 students annually in self-selected workplaces for 150 hours. This experience is the basis of in-depth analyses presented in summative assessments such as oral presentations and reflective portfolios. Students are supported in this process by university-based academic supervisors. They guide students in the identification of workplaces aligned to their career choices. Students are supported in their preparation of a learning contract which specifies a range of professional, academic and personal learning aims. Strategies which reflect the particular workplace context are developed for the achievement of these aims. The contract is then negotiated with the work-based supervisor who organizes meaningful tasks and ensures that the student has a fulfilling and challenging placement

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Phase I of the research project, which was initiated in 2005, established contact with the work-based supervisors currently hosting student placements. This provided the opportunity to explore their perceptions of the co-op process as well as communication with their students and the university. In particular, the research aimed to quantify the work-based supervisors’ satisfaction levels regarding the co-op documentation such as the learning contract. Also of interest was the quality of student performance in the workplace. Detail was requested regarding the time dedicated to supervision and the cost/value to the organization of hosting a co-op placement. Participants were asked to identify which skills a co-op student should ideally have. They also supplied detail regarding how many times

they had supervised a co-op student, whether they would be prepared to supervise again and what support would better prepare new supervisors*.

Phase II of the research project was based on the previous study's findings and occurred in 2007. The central objective of the second iteration was to strengthen the relationship between the School of Social Sciences and those employers providing student placements. Thus the study aimed to inform the enhancement of the School of Social Science's support systems for work-based supervisors, thereby progressing the development of strong and mutually supportive relationships. The research also involved consulting experienced work-based supervisors regarding the nature and delivery of appropriate and effective training materials. Their responses could shape an orientation package for new work-based supervisors. Those with experience could also have input into the enhancement of the university's communication systems regarding the placement and other related issues.

A section of the interview questions focused on aspects of the supervisory role. These included the reasons for being selected as the supervisor and the motivation for hosting a student placement. Participants were also asked to identify the challenges and rewards involved in supervising students as well as the characteristics of an effective work-based supervisor. Another goal was to build a pool of experienced and enthusiastic work-based supervisors who were interested in continuing to host student placements. It was hoped that relationship building could be initiated and more permanent sources of work-based learning opportunities established. The implementation of this phase of the research project would also provide the School with the opportunity to give more substantial acknowledgement of the pivotal role of co-op supervisors in the enhancement of students' readiness for employment. An initiative designed to sustain the program which offers work experience in the 'real world' also has the potential to inform and enhance the university's responsiveness to the human resource needs of a range of employers.

In summary, Phase II of the project had the potential to reveal the actuality of work-based supervisors' student supervision experiences, strengthen the University's co-op relationships and its support service quality, confirm the aspects of the cooperative education program which needed to be improved and initiate the process of being proactive in terms of enhancing quality.

METHODOLOGY

Phase I

Participants

As observed by Ficiliak, Drysdale and Pratt (2007), information about a research topic should be obtained from everyone involved to ensure external validity. However, this is not generally feasible nor practical. Therefore, this study followed the technique suggested by Braunstein and Stull (2001) to include "employers who have familiarity with cooperative education programs" (pp. 8-9). Those identified as appropriate survey participants had recently completed supervision of a co-op student. All were invited to a university-hosted social event which included a briefing on the purpose and process of the research project.

*The research project instruments identify the supervisor in the workplace as the "sponsor". The more current term which better reflects recent literature is "work-based supervisor". Hence this term is used in the article and the School's 2008 cooperative education paper handbook for Students.

Subsequently surveys were distributed for completion. Those work-based supervisors not in attendance were sent surveys that they could complete and return by post. Twenty-two supervisors returned completed surveys.

Design and Implementation of the Survey

The research project was initiated by a mature social sciences co-op student under the guidance of the writer and the previous placement coordinator. The survey aimed to establish a more substantial working relationship between the work-based supervisors and the university and explore the supervisory experience. The content and design of the survey was based on consultation with the colleague with relevant experience, a quantitative research expert and a selection of academic supervisors from the co-op program. The survey (Appendix I) consisted of 10 questions, 8 quantitative and 2 qualitative - the latter intended to give the data context and enable greater depth of analysis. The questions covered the following: the number of times sponsorship had been provided; ratings of key components of the Coop process including communication with AUT, and student capabilities; the number of hours used for mentoring; use of the sponsoring organization's resources; how worthwhile the sponsoring experience had been; the skills required by employers; advice for future supervisors; the value of the co-op program; suggestions for improvement and readiness to supervise again. The data were analyzed using SPSS, and a research report was written as an outcome for the student's reflective portfolio as the final assessment for her co-op paper. Subsequently, the student disseminated a snapshot of the research findings to all participants asking for any amendments/additions and seeking feedback regarding their willingness to supervise a social sciences student again (Appendix II).

Phase II

Participants

To encourage their on-going involvement, supervisors who had contributed to the surveys and had co-op students in 2005 and/or 2006 were invited to participate in interviews. Fifteen gave a positive response and the timing, location and duration of the interviews were confirmed (Appendix III). In this phase, more demographic data were collected from the participants to assess to what extent the sample was representative.

Design and Implementation of the Interviews

This qualitative approach to data collection was chosen to add breadth and depth to the information gathered in the previous survey. This replicates the methodology used by Chapman et al. (1999) who justify this mixed methods approach as enhancing the validity of the data. Filiciak et al. also recommend integrating methods to reap the benefits of the qualitative and quantitative approaches, and observe that "quantitative data enumerates, while qualitative data explains" (2007, p. 24). Referring to the limitations of their own data collected using a quantitative model, Braunstein and Stull comment "survey research can only answer the 'what' of employer perceptions, not 'why' employers feel the way they do about cooperative education" (2001, p. 16). This can best be explored at greater depth with a qualitative method such as interactive interviews.

Work-based supervisors who had participated in phase one of the project were contacted the following year (2006). Prospective participants were sent an overview of the next phase of the

research project and asked to return a reply form confirming their willingness to contribute (Appendix III). Those indicating an interest in continuing to be involved were sent a follow-up letter (Appendix IV). Telephone contact was made subsequently to establish the preferred timing and location of the interviews. Some 13 face-to-face, in-depth interviews were conducted by the author. Each was approximately an hour long and, with two exceptions, the interviews occurred at the workplace of the interviewee. The discussions were based on a semi-structured interview schedule comprising fourteen questions (Appendix V). Nine of the questions were open-ended to allow the exploration of additional information. The first four questions gathered background information regarding the organization and the employee's role, length of service and the extent of his/her supervisory experience. Questions also explored the supervisory role, the preparedness of students for the placement, the adequacy of AUT's support and communication as well as identifying strategies for the enhancement of the cooperative education process. The interviews were audio-taped and brief summaries of each were written to provide a context for the subsequent transcription. After the analysis of the data, participants received a summary of the findings and were offered the opportunity to request a copy of the draft report (Appendix VI). Subsequently, they were given the details regarding access to an electronic copy of the final report.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Phase I

There were 22 responses to the survey from the work-based supervisors and the responses are presented in Table 1. Responses are tabulated for the quality of the key components in the co-op program are detailed, and respondents quantified the time spent giving direction, analysis, feedback and supervision of student's work during the 150 hour placement along with the student's use of the host organization's resources, and overall satisfaction with the co-op program. In terms of constructive advice to future supervisors, several commented that it was important to offer students significant tasks that enabled them to apply their learning independently. Others suggested that clear instructions and goal setting were crucial. Individual respondents remarked that the organization should check the resource implications of supervision, the capabilities of the students should be ascertained before the placement begins and a range of tasks should be offered.

Finally, input regarding how AUT could improve the co-op experience of work-based supervisors was sought. There was agreement that there should be verbal communication with AUT beyond the interaction with the student and that contact with the co-op coordinator should occur. Some supervisors suggested that co-op staff should deliver an orientation program. Three observed that there was a lack of clarity regarding the purpose and content of the co-op process. One commented: "The brief needed to be much clearer. Still a bit unsure of the purpose of the exercise". Others commented on the length of time necessary for supervision, saying "40 hours is sometimes too much. 20-30 hours would be great". Another respondent asked that students have clearly defined goals about what they wish to achieve during their placement and take the initiative in asking for training and support. Approximately two thirds of the work-based supervisors surveyed were prepared to supervise again which reflects general satisfaction with the co-op process. However, there was also a clear message regarding the inadequacy of communication with and support from AUT.

TABLE 1
Workplace supervisors' responses to survey of satisfaction with the co-op program at AUT University (N=22)

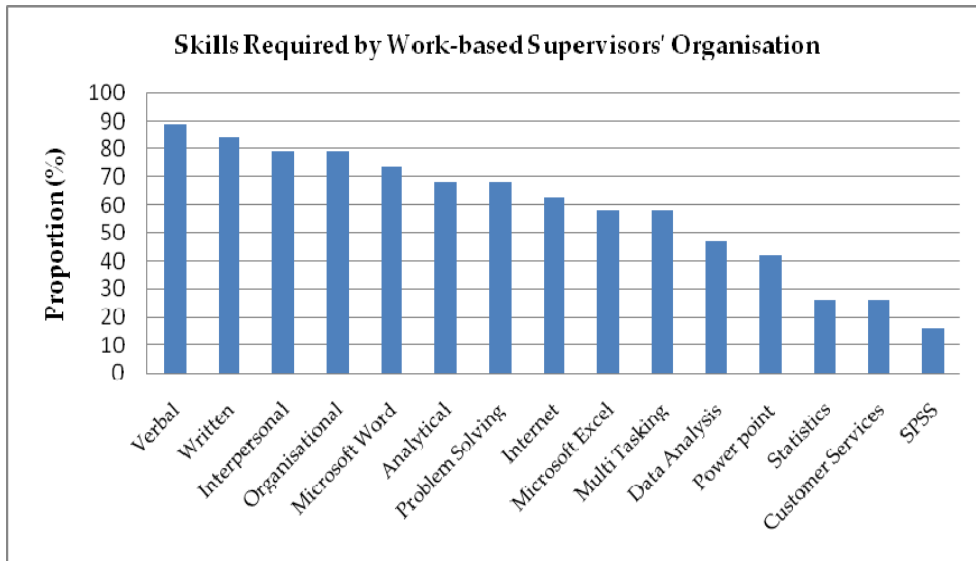
<i>Work-based supervisor experience</i>			
Number of times supervised co-op student (%)		Willingness to supervise again (%)	
1	64	Yes	73
2	9	No	9
2+	27	No response	18
<i>Rating of key elements of the co-op program</i>			
Negotiation of learning agreement/contract; students' attitude, skills and knowledge		Very satisfactory	
Quality of student work; program documentation		Satisfactory	
University support; University communication		Unsatisfactory	
<i>Supervisors commitment to co-op student (hours)</i>		<i>Use of organization's resources (%)</i>	
Range	4-80	Significant	19
Average	27	Acceptable	50
		Neutral	23
		Insignificant	1
<i>Overall satisfaction with co-op program (%)</i>			
Very satisfied	33		
Satisfied	50		
Neutral	17		

Most work-based supervisors were impressed by the capabilities and work of their students. Thus, more explicit guidance was needed regarding an appropriate level of hours dedicated to supervision, whilst the level of resourcing necessary to support a student placement was an issue for some; most felt that the investment was worthwhile. Regarding the skills and knowledge valued in the workplace, there was strong support for the significance of communication and organizational skills (Figure 1). The majority also prioritized analysis and problem-solving as well as Information Technology skills. These marketable skills are specified in the general profile of BA graduates and are developed in the compulsory papers in the BA Social Sciences/Psychology to reflect the needs of potential employers. Almost all of the papers require oral presentations and written assessments. Group projects are common also and these enhance the interpersonal and organizational skills of the students. Hence, the survey results do reflect the relevance and applicability of the skills and knowledge gained in the degree in preparation for entering the workforce.

The responses to the open questions regarding advice for future work-based supervisors and how to improve the co-op experience revealed that the supervisory role in the workplace is given considerable thought and attention. The concept of autonomous learning is supported as is the transference of the skills and knowledge gained at university to workplace practice. In addition to the recommendation for improvement with reference to the establishment of a communication line with the co-op coordinator, the issues raised were mostly organizational.

FIGURE 1

Student skills required by workplace supervisors' as measured by a survey of satisfaction with the co-op program at AUT University (N=22)



They were: clarification of why the student wanted workplace experience; the structure and content of the 150 hour placement and the student taking responsibility for initiating the process of training and support. The suggested orientation seminar for co-op supervisors could address these issues.

Phase II

Responses to the demographic questions are summarized in Table 2. The participants were all in senior roles in their organizations. Only 23% had less than 3 to 10 years' of experience in the workplace. Some 31% had sponsored students between two and four times, and the remainder was supervising students for the first time. The participants were distributed across business, tertiary education, government and non-governmental organizations. The NGOs varied in size in that the resettlement agency was large and the research consultancy and Peace Studies program were very small-scale. The government agencies were large - two were health providers, and one focused on housing. Two of the tertiary education providers were university-based and one was a private training establishment - all were large organizations, including the businesses which respectively focused on broadcasting, childcare and banking.

The following four questions explored the dimensions of supervision, and asked why the organization had selected the participant as the work-based supervisor. Most were keen to provide students work-based experience which would offer a valuable opportunity for them to realize their potential. Others were motivated by the prospect of creating a qualified workforce in the future. For example, a researcher felt that there was a lack of skilled graduates in the field of social research which could be addressed by providing actual research experience for social science students. Another participant worked in a small team and his manager was too busy to assume the responsibility

TABLE 2
Demographics of workplace supervisors' as measured by a survey of the co-op program at AUT University (N=22)

Organization type	Role	Service (years)	Frequency Sponsored students
University	Community project coordinator	8	1
Research Company	Lead researcher	10	4
Child-care	Director	9	1
Bank	Talent sourcer	5	1
International Language School	Internship manager	1	1
Hospital	Psychologist/researcher	1	1
Peace Studies	Coordinator	2	2
University	Equity policy advisor	6	1
Migrant Resettlement Service	Services manager	4	3
Property Services	Director	3	2
Rehabilitation Service	Workforce development leader	3	1
Housing	Tenancy manager	3	1
Radio	Creative director	10	1

One participant felt that as the workforce development leader, it was appropriate that he assumed the role as work-based supervisor. Another felt similarly because as head of the department, it was his responsibility to ensure that the student was well looked after in order to maximize the learning experiences which were on offer. The reasons for offering a placement were canvassed from the work-based supervisor's perspective and that of the organization. One motivation was to benefit from the student's enthusiasm, creativity and skills. Another was having back-up support when the ratio of staff and children in care had to be maintained. Employing a student was also perceived as enhancing the diversity of the workforce. Several felt that it was advantageous for their organization's profile to establish a relationship with a university and forge more links with the community. Such a commitment was seen as both a sound business move and free advertising. Supervising a student was also thought of as a recruitment technique: "We provide a free trial and they get a trial of us" and "It's kind of a match-making service, it's a test date".

Participants were asked to describe the challenges and rewards of the supervisory role. Most felt that it was very demanding, time-consuming and generally added to a heavy work-load. Often helping students manage their time was a significant feature. Considerable effort was required to support students' development of professionalism such as understanding the organization's culture, protocols, communication chains and procedures. More challenging still was enabling the student to become articulate in a professional environment. Supporting students from a non-English speaking background was seen by some as challenging but several work-based supervisors expressed a willingness to provide additional support in such circumstances. Three participants expressed concern regarding non-completion of tasks by students within an acceptable timeframe.

Most felt the quality of their student's contribution to the organization was impressive. They felt rewarded by the student's development and growth in confidence during the placement. Others felt satisfaction when their student achieved a permanent position in their or a similar workplace. When asked to identify the characteristics of an effective work-based supervisor, most viewed selecting the right student for their organization as of crucial importance. The student must be interested in the organization, have enthusiasm for the role, commitment to

the relevant career objectives and have the potential to learn new skills. The work-based supervisor needs to create substantial and challenging tasks as well as regularly monitor the student's progress and address any issues. It is also necessary to provide the required resources to facilitate successful completion of the tasks.

The student/work-based supervisor relationship was described as semi-professional as a level of distance needed to be maintained in order for the supervisor to be both firm and understanding. Many felt that it was advantageous if the work-based supervisor was able to see things from the student's point of view and had qualities of patience and empathy. Creating a sense of belonging in the organization for the students and encouraging them to use their initiative were also seen as important. How students could be better prepared for their placements was also explored. From the perspective of a supervisor who managed a research company, the development of the following skills needed more emphasis: report writing, general research skills, achieving confidence and clarity in oral presentations and competence in statistics generally and the use of SPSS, a quantitative data analysis tool. Most participants felt that a debriefing session at the conclusion of the placement to monitor the student's performance and completion of the 150 hours would be useful.

There was also general agreement that communication with the academic supervisor at the learning contract negotiation stage would be very useful. Often work-based supervisors found the contract too abstract and difficult to translate into meaningful tasks in the workplace. Many participants stressed the need for the student to have clear learning outcomes for the placement. It became apparent that the definition of learning outcome used by the participants with reference to the student placement differed from its usage in the learning contract developed by the academic supervisor and the student. This requires further clarification. It was seen as very important that the student had become familiar with the organization and its focus prior to making contact. Some participants suggested that the students develop a job description for themselves which would clarify their interests, skills and preferred career direction. This would also assist in detailing their requirements, responsibilities, appropriate tasks and identify what could reasonably be expected by the sponsor. These strategies were perceived as time saving.

A frequent observation was that there should be a good match between the student's personality and the degree of challenge represented by each placement. Another suggestion was that work-based supervisors be supplied with a typology of previous placements, the organizations and students' roles. Some participants commented that students were often over-committed with their studies, part-time work and personal lives. At times, this resulted in irregular and intermittent attendance which was frustrating and disappointing. One participant recommended that work issues regarding attendance and punctuality be stressed as part of the students' preparation. He commented "We may not be the most important thing in the students' lives but (providing this opportunity) demonstrates our commitment and I think it is quite important that they do honor that commitment to the best of their ability".

The quality and level of communication between work-based supervisors and AUT was investigated. There was general support at the contract negotiation stage for a meeting to identify the requirements, discuss suitable tasks and/or project, clarify the student's learning outcomes and the steps required to accomplish them. Some of the participants suggested that this be achieved by a three-way meeting of the work-based supervisor, academic supervisor and student at the outset of the placement. Other suggestions regarding

improving communication were weekly telephone calls, email exchanges with the academic supervisor or a site visit from the coordinator. One participant requested a presentation about the co-op process to staff.

In addition, several participants requested a simple electronic feedback form, which would provide academic supervisors with an up-date regarding for example, the student's attendance, reliability and accomplishment of tasks. This process could also highlight any concerns or issues perceived by the work-based supervisors. There was agreement that this feedback could be given on three occasions throughout the placement. That the feedback remained confidential was seen as important as the formal work-based supervisor evaluation form is collected by the student and appended to the portfolio. Therefore, whilst there may be room for improvement, such information is often not included. One participant requested prior notice regarding the dates of student placements and a brief statement of the prospective students' capabilities/likely roles.

Preferences regarding the delivery of the orientation program were also identified. Most participants felt the face-to-face meeting would work best. It was hoped it would clarify the cooperative education process, offer the opportunity to learn from experienced work-based supervisors, meet the coordinator and some academic supervisors, collect the co-op tool kit, and be acknowledged for their contribution. The comment was made that paper information about co-op tended to make the process seem more onerous than it was and therefore the alternative strategy of meeting work-based supervisors would better address the barriers to their successful involvement. Some participants felt that finding time for such a meeting would be difficult but there was unanimous agreement that it would be invaluable for those supervising for the first time. Most would appreciate a DVD or CD which would include the information described above but could be accessed when busy working days allowed it. There was some feeling that the CD option can be more interactive and enable users to choose the content relevant to them. However, there was also some concern regarding access to appropriate technology.

Participants were also asked to identify the information and materials that would be useful components of the orientation program. A key concern was that the work-based supervisor was entirely reliant on the student's understanding of the requirements of the cooperative education process and some students remain unclear about their preferred employment and what their goals. Clearer guidelines are required to support both parties. There was support for the following additional components of the training package: answers to frequently asked questions, a flow chart documenting key events in the co-op process from the perspectives of students and work-based supervisors, a general profile of Social Sciences students and an individual student profile detailing their skills, knowledge and career direction as well as guidelines for the supervisory role.

One participant requested the development of a feedback template to be used by students to comment on their work-based supervisor's support in terms of how well their needs were met, if they were challenged and well supported and whether the placement had been a valuable experience. Two participants recommended that students should deliver the oral presentation to their work-based supervisors prior to presenting it to staff, students and supervisors at the assessment stage as there had been some inaccuracies and omissions in previous years. With regard to the use of a co-op website, most participants agreed that it would provide a useful point of contact, enhance the accessibility of academic supervisors and best practice models could be show-cased. It could also support the new feedback

processes outlined above. Two participants expressed interest in establishing formal relationships between the School of Social Sciences at AUT University and their organizations. They were enthusiastic about the development of memoranda of understanding which may include for the organizations subsidized course fees and some promotion of their work and a quota of guaranteed co-op placements for the School.

DISCUSSION

The key findings of this study are supported by the literature. Hymon-Parker (1998) agrees that most common problems encountered in some cooperative education programs are due to loose organization and “the ambivalent support they receive from their academic institutions” (p. 76). The importance of the co-op triangle is supported by Eakins (2000) who states “The partnership and communication between the educational institution, students and employers must be strongly established, so that the context of the work place and the opportunities that it provides for the student learning are clearly understood by all parties” (p. 66).

The work reported by Chapman et al. (1999) had a similar focus to this research project as it checked the satisfaction levels with a university’s co-op service quality. It confirmed that the role of the academic supervisor required further explication and that there is a need to enhance the frequency and quality of communication. The significance of achieving the right match of student and placement is also identified by Bartkus et al. (2001) as the most important competency item in a supervisory training program. This project’s findings confirmed its significance and that of the other key competencies which are student preparation, giving student feedback and helping students use their skills and abilities in meaningful and productive work assignments.

Mirroring this study’s objective of building a pool of experienced work-based supervisors, King comments that as “the learning experience is a collaborative one between students, faculty, co-op coordinators and the supervisors, it is fitting to identify high quality supervisors and develop the relationship between the university and the supervisor” (King, 2001, p. 23). His description of the co-op supervisors’ role as teachers in the workplace echoes the observations of the work-based supervisors in Phase II of this project. He identifies their key role in the students’ professional development and describes work-based supervisors as “change agents” in the development of students’ confidence and as both educators and evaluators. Patterson (1997) adds detail to the requirements of this challenging role - listing the characteristics of effective supervisors as: technical expertise, good interpersonal skills and whilst being supportive of the integration of students in the organization, ensuring that they feel their contribution is valued.

Following the advice of Hurd and Hendy (1997), this study attempted to discover more about the actuality of employers’ co-op experiences. As Lazarus and Oloroso (2004) suggest, undertaking such research can progress the development of strong and mutually supportive relationships with sponsors as well as confirm the continuity of their involvement in the program. This study also attests to the high level of enthusiasm and willingness of sponsors to maintain their level of involvement in and support for the School of Social Sciences’ Cooperative Education program.

IMPLICATIONS

Much valuable information has been gathered about the strengths and weaknesses of the Co-op experience of work-based supervisors and students. This has informed several new developments and refinements of the program. The student's learning contract has been strengthened in terms of more constructive and well articulated learning aims and appropriate strategies with which to achieve them. This is now supported by linking students and academic supervisors on-line to better monitor the quality of learning contracts as they are being developed. As requested by a number of work-based supervisors, the opportunity to provide confidential feedback regarding the students' performance was trialed. The responses received were substantial and detailed. Most were extremely positive and it was disappointing that an agreement regarding access to the information had not been negotiated at the outset as it could have enhanced the students' CV, or been added as a reference for job applications. This development did have the additional benefit of increasing the communication of the work-based supervisors with the co-op placement coordinator. However, there was also some confusion as the requirement of additional feedback appeared to replicate the work-based supervisor's evaluation requested by the students at the conclusion of their placements. In response to some dissatisfaction regarding the time management of students, greater emphasis is made in co-op workshops on students being the representatives of the university when they undertake their work-based placements. Students now receive more explicit guidelines regarding their obligations to their employers and the necessity to be reliable and well-organized in their fulfillment of workplace responsibilities.

Another objective of the study was to encourage the continued involvement of work-based supervisors. This was acknowledged in 2007 by a social occasion for the co-op partners: sponsors, staff and students. The evening combined the Dean's academic prize-giving with the inaugural Sponsor's Award. The quality of work-based learning was show-cased by an oral presentation by a co-op student. The event was well attended and provided the opportunity for the work-based supervisors to network extensively as well as interact with co-op staff and students. The excellent contribution of all parties was acknowledged and the relationships affirmed - it has now become an annual event.

Another undertaking of the research was to inform the establishment of more robust channels of communication and a training package. Feedback on the best way to deliver the training implied that many employers lacked the necessary technology to access information on DVDs or CD. Thus the favored method to provide support and enhance communication between the university and the employers is the enhancement of the co-op website. The recommendations and toolkit model developed by Mayo (2004) will be modified to reflect the observations of the research participants regarding their information and training needs.

At the conclusion of the 2008 cooperative education program, several work-based supervisors signaled their interest and willingness to contribute to the introductory workshops for new co-op students. This will help clarify co-op for both parties at the initial stages of the process. It will encourage constructive dialogue amongst the three co-op partners. Students' access to sources of co-op placements will be facilitated and their future employment opportunities enhanced. In 2009, the co-op coordinator will be involved in a pilot project entitled "Capturing the Future: Professional and Vocational E-portfolios". A small number of co-op students will be trained to amass a variety of data, objects and

resources for a variety of purposes that include the personal, professional and vocational as well as create views for a variety of audiences. This could include a link with work-based supervisors involved in the co-op program to address some of the communication issues identified in this study. For example, this technology has the potential to provide a more effective and less time-consuming channel of communication at crucial times such as the negotiation of the students' learning contracts. An additional benefit will be the opportunity to showcase students' co-op learning. The university plans to eventually "house" e-portfolios for all graduate students and prospective employers will have access to those.

As a result of this research, the link between the School of Social Sciences and work-based supervisors is now more substantial. Responsiveness to their needs has been enhanced, the co-op paper is more robust and the learning experience of the students enriched. New technological developments will also strengthen the link between employers and job-seeking graduates. However, there is still much work to be done.

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APPENDIX I

Sponsor Evaluation of Cooperative Education Placements

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

1. How many times have you sponsored a co-op student?
2. How would you rate the following?
 - Negotiating the learning agreement with the student
 - The information supplied by the student
 - The information supplied by AUT
 - Support from AUT
 - Contact with AUT
 - Student's attitude
 - The work completed by the student
3. Considering instruction, supervision, and giving feedback approximately how much time over the whole co-op placement would you and your staff have devoted to your co-op student?
4. How would you rate the student's use of resources in your organization?
5. Has your investment of resources e.g. time been worthwhile?
6. Please indicate which skills your organization requires in a co-op student

Analytical skills	Microsoft Word
Written communication skills	Microsoft Excel
Verbal communication skills	Microsoft PowerPoint
Interpersonal skills	Knowledge of Internet Research tools
Customer service skills	Statistics
Organizational skills	SPSS
Problem solving skills	Multi-tasking
Data analysis	Other
7. If someone you know was considering sponsoring an AUT student, what advice would you give them?
8. How would you rate the overall co-op experience?
9. What if anything could AUT do to improve the co-op experience for you as a sponsor?
10. Would you be prepared to sponsor again?

APPENDIX II

Evaluation by of the Cooperative Education Program by Sponsors

Many thanks for your support of the co-op paper and your willingness to participate in the research project. Of the 38 sponsors involved last year, 22 responded to the survey. What follows is a snapshot of the research findings.

Key findings

- General satisfaction regarding the quality of the key components of the co-op program;
- Strong indication that improvement necessary in the School's support of and contact with sponsors;
- Quality of work and capabilities of students praised;
- Average time spent by sponsors supervising students was 27 hours;
- Use of host organization's resources thought of as acceptable and worthwhile;
- Skills and knowledge valued most highly by sponsors were verbal and written communication as well as organizational skills;
- 33% of sponsors were very satisfied with the co-op experience and 50% were satisfied;
- 66% of the sponsors were prepared to host a co-op student again.

Responses to open questions

- Demonstrated that the sponsorship role is given considerable thought and attention;
- Sponsors supported the concept of autonomous learning;
- Transference of skills and knowledge gained at university to workplace practice.

Your suggestions for improvement

- Verbal communication with the School of Social Sciences and contact with the co-op coordinator;
- Co-op staff to deliver an orientation to the co-op program for sponsors to clarify its purpose and process;
- Sponsors should offer students a range of significant tasks that enables them to work independently;
- Clear instructions from the sponsor and goal setting for the student;
- Students should take the initiative in asking for training and support.

Strategies under consideration to strengthen the link between sponsors and the School of Social Sciences

- Toolkit: co-op materials such as key documents, an outline of the attributes of co-op, contact details of the three parties, a checklist of key tasks, guidelines for student training;
- Telephone or email contact from co-op supervisor during contract negotiation or mid-term;
- Creation of a web page which could showcase the successes and challenges for students in the workplace, regular newsletter and on-line support for sponsors;
- Coop orientation: DVD? Face-to face? Electronic?;
- Development of a brochure which students would give to prospective sponsors at first meeting;
 - Develop a cluster of organizations willing to sponsor students on a regular basis;
 - Have a sponsor panel evening with a student audience including presentations from each organization's representative.

APPENDIX III

Enhancing Support for the Sponsors of Student Placements in Cooperative Education at the School
of Social Sciences, AUT University
Interview Schedule

1. Please describe the organization you work for
2. What is your role within the organization?
3. How long have you worked here?
4. How many times have you sponsored an AUT student?
5. Why has the responsibility of supervising a student been allocated to you?
6. Please explain the reasons for choosing to sponsor from your point of view and that of the organization.
7. What aspects of the sponsorship role have been the most challenging and most rewarding?
8. What are the characteristics of an effective sponsor? How could AUT's students be better prepared for their placements?
9. What would improve the quality and level of communication between sponsors and AUT during the placement?
10. Which of the following modes of delivery for an orientation for sponsors program would you prefer: DVD, face to face as part of a group or electronic?
11. What should the orientation program include in terms of information and materials?
12. Would a co-op website designed to assist sponsors be helpful and if so, what should it include?
13. Do you have further advice regarding enhancing the co-op process and/or the sponsor's relationship with AUT?

APPENDIX IV

Addressing the Weak Link: Enhancing the Support for the Sponsors of Student Placements in Cooperative Education A Summary of the Findings(April, 2007)

This research project endeavored to acknowledge the pivotal role of sponsors and strengthen the quality of AUT's co-op service delivery. It was hoped that the project would continue to build a resource of high quality, experienced and committed sponsors. To encourage their on-going involvement, sponsors who had contributed to the surveys conducted in Phase I of the project and had supervised students in 2005 and/or 2006 were invited to participate in the recent interviews. A summary of their contributions follows.

"Why has the responsibility of supervising a student been allocated to you?"

- Had a belief in the significance of providing students an opportunity to realize their potential;
- Desire to create a skilled workforce for the future;
- Responsibility assumed as was close to their actual role, e.g., recruitment;
- Wanted to maximize the learning experiences of the student;
- Would have appreciated the same opportunity themselves.

"Please explain the reasons for choosing to sponsor from your point of view and that of the organization?"

- Injection of fresh ideas, enthusiasm, skills and creativity;
- Another pair of hands when required;
- Enhancement of the diversity of the workforce;
- Advantageous for the organization's profile to establish a relationship with a university;
- To forge links with the community;
- Effective and economical recruitment technique.

"What aspects of the sponsorship role have been most challenging and most rewarding?"

- Time-consuming and additional to a heavy workload;
- Students required training in time management skills;
- Considerable support needed in the development of professionalism, i.e., understanding the organization's culture, protocols, communication chains and procedures;
- Enabling the student to become articulate in a professional environment was difficult;
- Supporting students from a non-English speaking background;
- Non-completion of tasks within an acceptable timeframe;
- Impressed by the quality of the student's contribution;
- Opportunity to network and connect with the community;
- The student's development and growth in confidence;
- Student's achievement of employment in the sponsor's or a similar workplace.

"What are the characteristics of an effective sponsor?"

- Being able to select the right student for the organization;
- The student must be interested in the organization, have enthusiasm for the role, commitment to relevant career goals and have the potential to learn new skills;
- Needs to create substantial and meaningful tasks;
- Regularly monitor the student's progress and address any issues;
- Provide the necessary resources to facilitate successful completion of the tasks;
- Maintain a semi-professional relationship and maintain a level of distance in order to be both understanding and firm;

- Ability to see things from the student's point of view;
- Qualities of patience and empathy;
- Create a sense of belonging in the organization for the student;
- Encourage the student to use their initiative.

"How could students be better prepared for their placements?"

- Student should have thorough knowledge of the organization prior to initial contact;
- Student should have clear learning outcomes identified before the initial meeting;
- Students should prepare a job description which clarifies their interests, skills and preferred career direction;
- Communication with the academic supervisor at the learning contract negotiation stage;
- Improve the abstract nature of the learning contract as it is difficult to translate into meaningful tasks in the workplace;
- The definitions of AUT and sponsors of "learning outcome" differ which needs clarification;
- The student's requirements, mutual responsibilities, appropriate tasks and what could reasonably be expected by the sponsor need clarification;
- Include a debrief at the conclusion of the placement to monitor the student's performance and completion of the 150 hours;
- In relation to research skills, the following require greater emphasis: report writing, oral presentation, statistics and the use of SPSS, a quantitative data analysis tool;
- A good match between the student's personality and the placement's degree of challenge;
- A typology of previous placements, the organizations and students' roles;
- More emphasis on punctuality and attendance.

"What would improve the quality and level of communication between sponsors and AUT during the placement?"

- A meeting at the outset should identify the requirements, discuss suitable tasks and/or project, clarify learning outcomes and the steps required to accomplish them;
- Weekly telephone calls, email exchanges and/or a site visit from the coordinator;
- The coordinator could make a presentation about co-op to staff in the organization;
- An electronic feedback form completed three times which up-dated the student's attendance reliability and accomplishment of tasks (in addition to the sponsor's evaluation form);
- Prior notice regarding the dates of placements and a brief statement regarding the students' capabilities/ likely roles.

"Which modes of delivery of an orientation for sponsors program would you prefer?"

- Face-to-face delivery was preferred by most;
- Experienced sponsors felt it may be difficult to find the time for such a meeting but recommended for first time sponsors;
- The paper information about the co-op process tended to make the process seem more onerous
- A DVD or CD of the training materials were seen as convenient as they could be accessed as busy working days allowed it
- The CD was perceived as more interactive and enabled users to choose the content relevant to them. However, access to appropriate technology was seen as an obstacle for some

"What should the orientation program include in terms of information and materials?"

- A key concern was that sponsors are entirely reliant on the student's understanding of the co-op requirements and some are unclear about their goals and possible role/s;
- Clarification of the cooperative education process;
- Opportunity to learn from experienced sponsors;
- Meet the coordinator and some academic supervisors;
- Collect the co-op toolkit which will include: answers to frequently asked questions a flow chart documenting key events for students and sponsors, individual student profiles and generic profiles of social sciences and psychology majors, guidelines for sponsors, a template

- for learning about the host organization and related health and safety issues;
- Acknowledgement of the contribution of sponsors;
- A feedback template for student comment on their sponsor's support, i.e., how well their needs were met, if they were challenged and well supported and whether the placement had been a valuable experience;
- Presentation of the oral presentation to the sponsor prior to presenting it to staff, students and sponsors at the assessment stage.

"Would a co-op website designed to assist sponsors be helpful and if so, what should it include?"

- A point of contact with the academic supervisor and coordinator
- Examples of best practice in terms of student placements
- Support for the new feedback processes outlined above

"Do you have further advice regarding enhancing the co-op process and/or the sponsor's relationship with AUT?"

- Establishment of a formal relationship between the School of Social Sciences and the organization, perhaps in the form of a memorandum of understanding.

ABOUT THE JOURNAL

The Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative education (APJCE) arose from a desire to produce an international forum for discussion of cooperative education issues for practitioners in the Asia-Pacific region and is intended to provide a mechanism for the dissemination of research, best practice and innovation in work-integrated learning. The journal maintains close links to the biennial Asia-Pacific regional conferences conducted by the World Association for Cooperative Education. In recognition of international trends in information technology, APJCE is produced solely in electronic form. Published papers are available as PDF files from the website, and manuscript submission, reviewing and publication is electronically based.

Cooperative education in the journal is taken to be work-based learning in which the time spent in the workplace forms an integrated part of an academic program of study. Essentially, cooperative education is a partnership between education and work, in which enhancement of student learning is a key outcome. More specifically, cooperative education can be described as a strategy of applied learning which is a structured program, developed and supervised either by an educational institution in collaboration with an employer or industry grouping, or by an employer or industry grouping in collaboration with an educational institution. An essential feature is that relevant, productive work is conducted as an integral part of a student's regular program, and the final assessment contains a work-based component. Cooperative education programs are commonly highly structured and possess formal (academic and employer) supervision and assessment. The work is productive, in that the student undertakes meaningful work that has economic value or definable benefit to the employer. The work should have clear linkages with, or add to, the knowledge and skill base of the academic program.

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The editorial board welcomes contributions from authors with an interest in cooperative education. Manuscripts should comprise reports of relevant research, or essays that discuss innovative programs, reviews of literature, or other matters of interest to researchers or practitioners. Manuscripts should be written in a formal, scholarly manner and avoid the use of sexist or other terminology that reinforces stereotypes. The excessive use of abbreviations and acronyms should be avoided. All manuscripts are reviewed by two members of the editorial board. APJCE is produced in web-only form and published articles are available as PDF files accessible from the website <http://www.apjce.org>.

Research reports should contain; an introduction that describes relevant literature and sets the context of the inquiry, a description and justification for the methodology employed, a description of the research findings-tabulated as appropriate, a discussion of the importance of the findings including their significance for practitioners, and a conclusion preferably incorporating suggestions for further research. Essays should contain a clear statement of the topic or issue under discussion, reference to, and discussion of, relevant literature, and a discussion of the importance of the topic for other researchers and practitioners. The final manuscript for both research reports and essay articles should include an abstract (word limit 300 words), and a list of keywords, one of which should be the national context for the study.

Manuscripts and cover sheets (available from the website) should be forwarded electronically to the Editor-in-Chief directly from the website. In order to ensure integrity of the review process authors' names should not appear on manuscripts. Manuscripts should include pagination, be double-spaced with ample margins in times new-roman 12-point font and follow the style of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association in citations, referencing, tables and figures (see also, <http://www.apa.org/journals/faq.html>). The intended location of figures and diagrams, provided separately as high-quality files (e.g., JPG, TIFF or PICT), should be indicated in the manuscript. Figure and table captions, listed on a separate page at the end of the document, should be clear and concise and be understood without reference to the text.

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