

## **Generating academic standards and assessment practices in work integrated learning: a case study from urban and regional planning**

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Enhancing academic standards and assessment practices in work integrated learning (WIL) is crucial to securing its place in high quality student learning. Yet, the diverse purposes and perspectives associated with WIL present distinctive challenges to achieving this goal. The paper highlights the issues involved and explores them through a case study from student work placement in urban and regional planning. The study was funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council. The project team comprised members from RMIT University, Griffith University and La Trobe University. Whilst the study focused on one particular industry, the paper explores implications that are transferable to other disciplines and professions. In particular, it seeks to acknowledge the complexity of both the learning outcomes of work placement and the contexts within which that learning occurs. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 2009, 10(3), 203-215).

**KEYWORDS:** Academic standards, assessment, urban and regional planning, work integrated learning, work placement.

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This paper addresses the question of academic standards and assessment practices in work integrated learning (WIL). It introduces broad considerations drawn from the literature and examines them through a case study that focuses specifically on the structured work placement form of WIL in higher education programs of urban and regional planning. The Planning Institute of Australia (PIA), the professional body, describes the work of planners as “professionals who specialize in developing strategies and design the communities in which we live, work and play. Balancing the built and natural environment, community needs, cultural significance, and economic sustainability, planners aim to improve our quality of life and create vibrant communities” (Planning Institute of Australia [PIA], 2005, p. 1).

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The paper represents an attempt to confront normative questions: how should we conceptualize academic standards in WIL; how do we best put them into practice? The case study begins from an empirical base: how are academic standards understood presently by participants in WIL; how in practice are they realized? These are valuable questions to pose in the context of WIL since they focus attention on the perceived outcomes of such student learning experiences and the relation of these outcomes to the academic programs in which students are enrolled.

The paper leads to an understanding of academic standards and assessment practices that seeks to value rather than simplify the complexities involved. The empirical inquiry underlines the importance attributed to work placement by educators, workplace supervisors and students. It suggests that whilst all are attentive to questions of standards and assessment, there is potential for development. Yet, enhancing educational practice requires working with the complexities – or risks compromising the very features of structured work placement that participants value most.

#### UNDERSTANDING WHAT'S AT STAKE

Both the educational policy setting and the rising emphasis in universities on student outcomes lead towards the need for a closer examination of academic standards and assessment practices in student workplace learning. Yet conceptualizing and implementing standards and assessment in workplace learning is not altogether straightforward.

Within Australia, federal government regulations determine whether or not students may be charged fees for courses that have a work-based component to them (Commonwealth of Australia, 2004). Essentially, where the student is simply on work experience in industry, they can only be asked to pay towards the administrative costs borne by the university in organizing and monitoring such experiences. If however, the university can claim to be directing and managing the student's learning whilst they are engaged in industry activity, then income can flow to the university in the same way as a conventional university-based course.

These regulations have caused some consternation. Firstly, they have tightened up the conditions for funding of industry-related student experiences. Secondly, they have embedded within them some questionable assumptions about what it means to direct and manage student workplace learning. Yet, on the positive side, the regulations have crystallized distinctions in higher education between experience and learning in the workplace. What are the implications for academic standards? Essentially, courses generating student fee revenue should be able to demonstrate that enrolled students are engaged in learning that has all the hallmarks of curriculum design expected of any university course, including an articulation of academic standards. Work-based courses which do not attract revenue can exercise their discretion over the extent to which student work experience is set within academic curriculum design.

Addressing academic standards in Australia, James (2002) has argued that for too long universities had relied on an 'input' approach to standards in contrast to 'outcomes'. Crudely put, if universities adequately gate-kept student entry, then reasonable standards at exit could be assumed. The pendulum has now swung. Academic standards now speak loudly to what it is that students emerge with from their program of study.

What students emerge with can be understood as the sum total of a multitude of courses they have completed en route. This can be aggregated with various formulae to provide a grade point average or an overall class of degree. But the attention to outcomes is associated with another significant trend in higher education. The capability movement has sought to bring a different kind of coherence to academic programs (Stephenson & Yorke, 1998). With the whole being seen as more than the sum of the parts, a set of courses produces graduate capabilities that the program is designed to deliver. The logic goes further: agree on the graduate capabilities for your program, and map backwards to define how each component course contributes to their acquisition.

Capabilities are about intellectual prowess in a given field of study – yet, not solely. Capabilities are intended to be more holistic than this (O'Reilly, Cunningham & Lester, 1999). They are about the way we act and the way we are – the abilities to do and to be. Capabilities broaden out from the intellectual to include moral education and practice education. Capabilities have an uncertain relation to both 'competencies' and to 'attributes'. Competencies are generally held to be rather more behaviorally and skill oriented. Attributes are largely used to talk about what can be expected of any student graduating from a given university, no matter what their field of study. But inevitably these distinctions are somewhat artificial and there is a good deal of juggling between them.

All this has direct relevance for our understandings of academic standards and assessment in student workplace learning. Those standards, one way or another, have to address what it is that students come out with from their WIL activity. And what they come out with can be thought about in terms of capabilities, or competencies, or attributes – or all three. But what do we mean by these standards being 'academic'. Do we now understand academic to be more than 'intellectual', to be more than the exercise of critical thought? Is it academic to learn how to 'do' or how to 'be'? Some might well argue that a new vocationalism is threatening scholarly traditions (Symes & McIntyre, 2000); or, that employers and professional accrediting bodies are gaining too much sway over the academic program, too much ground in defining what student outcomes are desirable (Gonczi, 1994). Academic standards in WIL are contentious territory.

In some respects, reconciling academic standards with WIL may seem fairly straightforward. Surely, all one has to do is set assignments that can be assessed in much the same way as any other piece of academic work: a case study; an organizational analysis; a practice evaluation; a reflective essay. At one level, of course this resolves the dilemmas. One can assess from the comfort of the marking room the student's display of analytical, critical and reflective capability. The application of pre-determined assessment criteria may help ensure consistency (at least according to the recently received wisdoms of good assessment practice), and grades can be moderated as others view the textual evidence. What's the problem? Naturally, it depends. It depends on what it is one is aiming to assess, on what it is that academic standards are standards of.

These kinds of written assignments bring academic standards back into the purview of the university. They are extrinsic, existing apart from the workplace experience; and they can be transported readily into the university. They exist outside of the student who produces them – a 'piece of work' that can be handed in (by the due date). They are evidence that the student has learned how to do the academic task. But if we are talking about authentic assessment, in the sense of assessment fitting to the learning environment, then maybe this solution is not altogether hitting the mark (Wiggins, 1998). It's a solution that reinforces an

established understanding of academic standards derived from university-based learning activities. It preserves a sense of academic that is removed from the student experience in the workplace. Perhaps that is inevitable, and not altogether undesirable. If the learning objective is for students to stand aside from the workplace experience and show they can analyze, critique and reflect from the university vantage point what they found in the world of work, then perhaps this is a valid way to do it. Let professional standards take care of the capabilities students display in the workplace, and preserve academic standards in the university domain. But we can ask: is it possible to have a sense of academic standards not quite so removed from the immediacy of workplace learning that is at the heart of WIL? Are there approaches to academic standards and assessment practices that do not reinforce the separation between what is inside and outside the university domain? Perhaps we need a bit more of a re-think. There are other assessment literatures that can help us with this.

The achievement of complex (or divergent or emergent) learning outcomes has become a topic of interest in higher education that seeks to foster 'deep learning'. The assessment of complex learning is, to coin a phrase, 'complex' (Knight & Banks, 2003). Considerations here are questioning the wisdoms of using pre-set assessment criteria as the preferred practice. Something important can be lost when a complex achievement is reduced to the aggregate of its parts. Assessors, cognizant of this, are likely to make global judgments and operate with a level of indeterminacy not captured in espoused principles of assessment criteria (Sadler, 2008). The assessment of complex learning outcomes is placing the spotlight once again on the exercise of judgment by assessors; the place of tacit knowledge in the expertise that goes into judgments by experienced assessors; and, the value of engaging students in learning how to develop judgment-making (expertise in assessment) through the assessment process itself (Boud, 2007). Clearly, this line of thinking stands in quite stark contrast to an emphasis on measurement, formulae and ever more finely grained criteria as the means to securing reliability and validity in assessment.

It also suggests a rather different emphasis in our approach to formative (low stakes) and summative (high stakes) assessment. In the context of WIL (employability agendas in particular), Knight and Yorke (2003) argue strongly for using learning oriented assessment that is predominantly low stakes and formative in nature. They question the extent to which the complex learning associated with workplace environments can be captured in a trustworthy way in summative assessment beyond a pass/fail judgment, which may be required especially where professional accreditation looks for warrants of fitness to practice (Knight & Yorke, 2006). Limits to trustworthiness have to do with: contingencies impacting on the learning environment; unpredictability of learning outcomes; and, variability in the quality of learning resources and processes (involving, amongst other things, the contribution of workplace supervisors).

Given the complexity and issues that surrounds them, it is instructive to examine and learn from how assessment practices and academic standards in WIL are conceptualized and operationalized on the ground by the key stakeholders involved in WIL: educators, students and practitioners. In this study the focus is on the particular case of academic standards and assessment practices in structured work placement in urban and regional planning in Australia.

## THE PROFESSIONAL AND EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT OF URBAN AND REGIONAL PLANNING

Academic standards and assessment practices in WIL in planning occur in a set of overlapping and fluid contexts. The job of a planner, and the institutional settings in which planners work, span a great spectrum and are constantly on the move (Thompson, 2007b). The profession has a debatable boundary and status (Marshall, 2007). In Australia, the history and legislative framework for planning varies considerably from one state jurisdiction to another (Williams, 2007). The practice of planning takes place in a politicized and often conflicted environment. Real world planning tasks and planning problems are multi-dimensional, complex, unique and do not lend themselves to the application of generalized, pre-formatted theories and prescriptions (Bolan, 1980).

During the study period, the labor market in Australia and elsewhere, until the economic downturn at the end of 2008, had experienced an acute prolonged undersupply of qualified planners (PIA, 2004) stimulating a proliferation of new programs in planning. Yet University resources for planning education are stretched (PIA, 2004). Meanwhile, the professional accrediting body has recently commissioned a review of planning education (Gurran, Norman & Gleeson, 2008). At the same time, the significance of planning and the built environment for social, economic and environmental prosperity has if anything been gaining in recognition (Thompson, 2007a).

Of ongoing concern and debate in planning education and scholarship have been the preparation and preparedness of graduates for the complexities and challenges of professional practice and a sometimes perceived divide between theory and practice (Baum, 1996; Innes, 1995; Minnery, 2000; Myers & Banerjee, 2005; Sandercock, 1997, Sorensen & Auster, 1997). A result has been the emergence of the practice movement in planning (Watson, 2002). Here practice has increasingly become the attention of research and scholarship (e.g., Schön, 1987), and education is infused with more of what has become to be known as WIL including the traditional planning studio style of teaching which emphasizes project work and problem solving (Brown & Moore, 1989).

Within this practice orientation, structured work placement has held a special role in planning education overseas (Brooks et al., 2002) and in Australia (Coiacetto, 2004). Structured work placement means that which involves a work placement, classroom activities and assessment. However, the extent and nature of such education remains to be investigated. What is the extent of such education in Australia? How is assessment undertaken, what is its form, and what standards are used? What are the stakeholders' perceptions and understandings of assessment and standards?

## METHODS OF INQUIRY

The study involved two stages for which the data gathering was completed in the period from May 2007 to July 2008. The first stage involved a survey of planning programs across Australia, and their forms of structured work placement education and assessment. Websites and online and hard-copy course outlines were the principle sources of data, supplemented in some instances with information with planning academics interviewed in the second stage. Because of the proliferation of programs with 'planning' in their names, this and the next stage focused on PIA accredited programs only.

The project had as its rationale the notion of an inclusive and participative approach to investigating academic standards in the structured placement form of WIL. Thus in the second stage, the project aimed to involve all key stakeholders of structured work placement activities. Focusing on undergraduate planning programs, which are the dominant form of planning education and principle avenue into a planning career in Australia, the project engaged planning educators, planning workplace supervisors and planning students in, variously, interviews and focus groups. It conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 academics involved in structured placement education and with 40 professional planning practitioners from three Australian regions who had supervised students on these placements. It also conducted four focus groups with a total of 34 students from two Universities who had undertaken these structured placement courses.

With the questioning individually tailored to each group the study inquired into the stakeholders' experiences in structured placement, its challenges, and their understandings of, perceptions, reflections and opinions on assessment therein. Interview and focus group questions were trialed prior to implementation and refined accordingly. Interviewers and group moderators met intermittently to review their use of the schedules and to ensure in particular an acceptable consistency in their manner of engagement. With consent, the interviews and focus group meetings were recorded and transcribed.

Within the broad tradition of thematic analysis of qualitative research data (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998), the research team adopted a three-pronged approach to the material. Following Boyatzis (1998), both deductive and inductive processes were employed. A participatory phase was added to this (Robson, 2002), involving key stakeholders in the analysis. *Deductively*, the interview and focus group schedules were informed by the literature review and preliminary conversations with stakeholders. *Inductively*, the 'raw' transcripts and summaries by interviewers were brought to project team meetings and interrogated for emergent themes. These were circulated for comment to those who had been interviewed as a means of furthering their *participation*.

The analysis generated many and detailed findings on stakeholders' experiences and understandings of structured work placement (Jones et al., 2009). For the purposes of this paper, emphasis is placed on those findings that held special relevance to matters of assessment and standards.

#### FINDINGS: ASSESSMENT AND STANDARDS IN STRUCTURED WORK PLACEMENT EDUCATION IN URBAN AND REGIONAL PLANNING EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA.

While the clarity, accessibility and currency of information in websites is not always perfect, it appeared that there were 90 planning programs in Australia. Of these, 43 were accredited by the PIA and comprise 19 undergraduate programs at 11 universities and a further 24 postgraduate programs at 14 universities. Work placement is more common in undergraduate programs than in postgraduate ones: 11 undergraduate programs have work placement whereas only four postgraduate programs have it and in two of these cases it is as an elective. With neither assessment nor teaching contact, only one of the undergraduate programs had a work placement that could not be called 'structured' in any sense. In the others, characteristics of the structured placement such as the university contact time, the amount of workplace time and where it sits in the program varied greatly. The variation, later interviews with academics revealed, is the result of institutional and historical factors, pedagogical objectives and of the available resourcing. The one constant across institutions

was that assessment emphasized reflective assessment (essays, journals, presentations, etc.) over assessment of learning in the workplace and of performance in the workplace.

#### *Planning Educators*

It was striking from the early phases of the inquiry that all planning programs unequivocally endorsed the importance of practice education and of structured work placement. Planning educators interviewed for the project (from 11 of the planning schools with professional accreditation) were clearly of the view that professional and practical aspects were foundational to their programs, and that practice education had huge benefits for students and employers. However, there was no consensus amongst them as to how it was best conceived and delivered. There was a commonly expressed ethos of experiential and reflective learning as underpinning practice education. But the respective contributions of university- and work-based learning environments to practice education were construed somewhat differently across the planning schools. Four main approaches were discernible: the provision of brief encounters with practice; project-based work; structured work placement; and work experience. Structured work placement, the primary focus of the empirical study, was clearly just one form of practice education amongst many to be found in planning programs.

There was general preference amongst the planning educators that assessment should encourage reflective rather than mechanistic practice. The interviews suggested an affiliation with the idea that assessment should foster a critical exploration by students of what they learned through exposure to work and professional contexts, and what in their practice they might improve or do differently. This was seen to be moving beyond understanding and applying workplace skills and competencies. Some placed special weight on the importance of developing ethical practice. The assessment instruments included group work project reports, seminar presentations, case studies, journals, diaries, reflective reports, planning capabilities portfolio, and employer reports. As a rough rule, the less university-based the course, the less likely it was that assessment would be graded beyond pass/fail. Where grading occurred, the planning educators indicated that they set out the expectations and assessment criteria in much the same way as conventional university-based courses. Reasons for using (non-graded) pass/fail assessment included difficulties in: ensuring control over the quality of learning experiences; working with different levels of employer experience; and, moderating assessment appropriately.

#### *Planning Workplace Supervisors*

Observations can also be made from themes arising out of interviews with workplace supervisors engaged in structured work placements. Placements are not easy to secure. The labor market can be a factor here, with some host organizations seeing benefits in student workplace learning as a recruitment strategy in times of low supply. For such organizations, there may be an underlying motivation to try to ensure students have a good experience of the workplace. Workplace supervisors spoke in terms of a guided immersion for their students into the realities of employment and professional practice. Many were influenced by their own experiences of placement and/or work supervision: positive ones to be replicated; negative ones to be rectified. There were striking examples of workplace supervisors with no formal training in student supervision being acutely aware of the harm that punitive and judgmental feedback can cause – and the barriers this can create to learning.

For many work place supervisors, a key aim was to see the student grow in confidence. They were sensitive to the differences in students, from those who seemed naturally comfortable in the workplace to those who were uneasy and diffident. They spoke of the importance of communication, of working alongside others, of learning how to deal with people, and learning how to make decisions. Making decisions and negotiating change are salient themes in the planning profession. They require sophisticated capabilities that are analytic, interpretive, ethical, communicative, and sometimes transformative. Work placements were perceived by workplace supervisors as laying the ground for complex achievements of this kind. The workplace needed to allow for mistakes but sometimes in a context of high risk – planning processes have major consequences, and for private consultancies there are reputations to protect. A watchful eye was needed, but not an intimidating one. Not surprisingly, workplace supervisors largely expressed the view that universities were about learning to think and workplaces learning to do.

Planners are very busy people. Whilst some were prepared to invest highly in students for later benefits, there was general consensus that involvement in detailed and time consuming supervision and assessment on their part was not a realistic option. Indeed, it was evident that many hadn't found the time (or maybe inclination) to read and absorb much of the university course documentation with which they had been provided. Supervision and feedback largely occurred on the basis of day to day assistance with specific work tasks, 'checking in' and getting alongside, perhaps with periodic appointments, and all supported in most instances by team colleagues. Overall, the view was that student assessment was the responsibility of the university. Submission of a simple report on their experience and observations of a student was seen as feasible. Whilst some appeared to favor an assessment template, others thought such an instrument would be more useful for students than for supervisors. Most agreed in principle that a negotiated learning plan would be valuable, preferably with some guidance as to broad areas from which the student would create their individual learning goals and tasks. It was almost a taken for granted assumption that students would exercise agency in shaping their learning experience within the workplace context.

#### *Planning Students*

Most students were very positive about the value of their work placement. They felt it gave them experience of what planners actually do and how they do it. It acted both to introduce them to planning practice and to networks for future employment. They gained confidence in their abilities to be planners, accomplish planning work and develop as professionals. Work placement was a steep learning curve, according to many. It was exposing and testing – there could be no hiding in the shadows. Of course, work placement wasn't a happy experience for everyone. Expressed difficulties related to mundane work tasks, absent supervisors, troubles with other staff and balancing placement commitments with other study and life demands.

Though some began to discount the value of university learning, and were critical of how little it had prepared them for the 'realities', others believed that knowledge and theory from university was a part of what they did and meant they noticed what was going on in the workplace. At some level, students appeared aware of the debates surrounding the respective roles of workplace and university learning – and often had opinions about this. As their confidence to perform grew, some were attracted by the paid work on offer and spoke rather dismissively about what university had left to offer beyond the award itself.



But many others had pondered the importance of critical thinking and analysis, and wanted the university to forge greater connection between their increased professional competence and their abilities to be critical and reflective practitioners. A significant theme in this respect concerns the way in which students very much located their experience of structured work placement within the academic program as a whole. Their accounts strongly advocated for purposefully linking workplace learning with what comes before and after.

As regards assessment in the workplace, students were generally somewhat hazy. Some felt there weren't any specific goals or benchmarks for them to achieve. Rather, the expectations were often considered to be more general; about the quality of work and how one came across. Whilst their supervisors might be providing a final report, there was some sense that it didn't carry that much weight in the overall scheme of things. Consequently, it didn't much matter if it remained unclear what the report was based on or how it was compiled; or, in some instances, if a good report was motivated by the employer wanting the student to stay on. More value appeared to be placed on the day to day feedback the student received on work tasks or how they were travelling.

When it came to more conventional university assessment tasks related to structured work placement, the students appeared to expect clear criteria to be in place; for example, as to what constituted a good reflective report. Tasks which enabled them to 'round off' their placement experience, by pulling together their thoughts about the experience or analyzing an issue they had encountered, seemed to be particularly appreciated. Students were able to work with these kinds of assignments. They were, in a sense, on familiar ground. Yet, the familiar ground did not feel altogether comfortable. It was through their experiences on placement that many felt they had learned so much. They had applied themselves in a committed way to making the most of the opportunities presented them. They felt they had developed in their professional and personal capabilities. For such students, university assessment tasks seem to be missing the mark. They sensed that their actual performance on placement, and their engagement with their supervisors, clients and work groups in feedback and learning on placement, was not reflected adequately in the course standards and assessments. They thought such achievements should have been much more central.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR ENHANCING ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

Whilst planning educators and workplace supervisors each in their own way enacted practices that explicitly or implicitly attended to the matter of standards and assessment, the findings suggest that students experienced some divergence between these sets of practices. This does not appear to have detracted greatly from the overall positive view that students held about work placements. Students clearly did value the opportunities that they felt only such connection with the working environment could offer. However, there is evidence that students can feel confused, puzzled and sometimes frustrated when faced with conflicting messages about the underlying purpose of their time in the workplace.

As has been suggested, the matter of standards and assessment for work placement is not at all straightforward and it is not that planning educators and workplace supervisors were inattentive to the importance of these matters. Yet, there was an element of doing the best they could with these issues under complex and challenging conditions – almost for some, a sense of muddling through. In such circumstances, students are left to find ways of bridging the workplace and the university, and carrying the dissonance.

The project's findings help capture the lived experience of stakeholders to work placement. They show how the constituent parties 'pull off' a student placement despite sometimes restricted levels of capability, resourcing and organizational support, and in circumstances where mutual roles and expectations can be far from clear. However, the findings also raise questions about the quality of the educational design of work placement, and they do so at the very pointy end of assessment and standards. They expose the need to return to some fundamental considerations in addressing these design issues. What are the objectives of the work placement? What are the desired outcomes, and how do we know the extent to which they have been achieved? Are the assessment practices consistent with the outcomes? Who is contributing what towards the assessment? And so on.

Yet, the findings importantly alert us to the naivety of assuming that quality in work placement education can be raised by simply inviting the stakeholders to engage with such questions. Enhancing standards and assessment in work placement learning requires a related set of actions that is educationally informed whilst being sensitive to the contexts of application. Crucially, enhancements should not risk detracting from the exploratory, personal learning of students that accompanies their professional development. It is self-defeating to codify learning outcomes in order to make them amenable to systematic assessment if this destroys the richness of the learning experience for students.

- Assessment in structured work placement needs to be reviewed for its alignment and authenticity;
- "Situated learning" needs to be complemented with "situated assessment";
- Assessing the complex learning outcomes associated with structured work placement needs to allow for the exercise of judgment by assessors;
- Structured work placement needs to connect with the students' professional development and career trajectories across the entirety of their study program;
- Pre-, during, and post-placement learning activities need to work at creating a greater sense of shared purpose across the major stakeholders (planning educators, students and workplace supervisors);
- The shared purpose needs to be reflected in learning outcomes and assessment framework(s) that embody a high degree of flexibility;
- An assessment framework needs to be responsive to local conditions and staff capacities to be viable and sustainable;
- Contingent learning (unintended learning outcomes) is a significant and valued feature of structured work placement and any assessment framework needs to acknowledge and encourage this; and
- An assessment framework needs to consider both rewarding the quality with which the student undertakes their "learning journey" and celebrating their arrival at key personal and professional "milestones".

FIGURE 1

Principles for enhancing academic standards and assessment practices in student work placement (adapted from Jones et al., 2009)

- Quality of communication between university and industry
- Coherence for structured work placement within the overall academic program
- Assessment literacy of academic staff members
- Organizational recognition of distinctive features of structured work placement
- Place of professional accreditation

FIGURE 2

Contextual factors in the enhancement of academic standards and assessment practices in student work placement (adapted from Jones et al., 2009)

Nor should enhancements risk alienating university or workplace staff, who so often bring a dedication and passion that has helped sustain the very existence of work placement learning. At the same time, the project suggests that the educational basis of work placement does require strengthening if this learning activity is to secure its claim to be a valid component of an academic program. What is required then is perhaps a light, but guiding, touch.

It is in the scope of the paper only to introduce what may comprise the features of such an approach to enhancement as suggested by this project. There are three related elements. Firstly, it is necessary to identify a series of principles for standards and assessment in work placement learning. These are principles that can inform the considerations of stakeholders to a work placement learning program. They represent a broad understanding of key features in the generation of standards and assessment fitting to the task (see Figure 1). Secondly, it is possible to identify a number of contextual factors that impact upon the ways in which those principles may be realized in any given work placement program. These factors again need to be recognized and considered by the stakeholders, creating a mutual understanding of what may or may not be viable in their specific situations (see Figure 2).

The third set of actions for enhancement is crucial but is more a matter of positioning. The project has investigated the ways in which standards and assessment are created and made real through the everyday activities of the participants. This constructivist approach has highlighted the significance for the student experience of the meanings attributed to standards and assessment by those intimately involved in the doing of work placement. The implication is that an externally generated set of standards and accompanying assessment is unlikely to improve the student experience. Rather, it is the quality of the dialogue between stakeholders as they engage in generating standards and assessment that will have the greatest influence. Overall then, the light, but guiding, touch becomes a grounded building of new practices within a clear contextual framework and informative set of principles.

Finally, it should be noted that part of the fluidity of the current context for planning practice education in Australia concerns the position of the professional accrediting body, PIA, and its requirements of planning programs. To date, PIA has not adopted an overly prescriptive approach to the capabilities of planning graduates. However, it is easy to see how there could well be changes in professional self-regulation regarding, for example, public protection or a more stringent ethical code of conduct for members. If this were to transpire, then the accreditation of planning programs might come to include greater scrutiny of the minimum standards of practice achieved by graduates. One could then expect to see a shift in emphasis within practice-based education towards warranting for 'fitness to practice', with consequent changes to the construction of academic standards and assessment practices.

## CONCLUSION

Academic standards and assessment practices are a focal point for the ongoing development and maturation of work integrated learning. Whilst the agendas of work readiness and employability may have advanced the place of WIL in higher education programs, this new found standing will only be sustained if WIL can demonstrate a robust approach to fundamental educational practice. The academic promise of WIL is that it can expand and inform understandings of student learning that integrate capabilities of acting and being with

ones of thinking. But this will require academic standards and assessment practices to be re-  
visioned accordingly.

Such complex issues necessitate complex responses. The shape those responses are likely to  
assume is itself dependent on a range of contextual factors. These include, for example, the  
resources and infrastructures available to support WIL activities, and the place of WIL in  
warranting 'fitness to practice' in accord with professional accrediting bodies. The case  
study behind this paper is further evidence that the contributing parties to WIL are aware of  
these matters and their complexities – though perhaps often muddling their way through  
them. Generating fitting academic standards and assessment practices for student work  
placement depends in good measure on those parties engaging in creative dialogue,  
informed by principles of good educational practice and responsive to the contextual factors  
that impact upon future possibilities.

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## 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.

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