

Construction of an instrument to measure effectiveness of placement settings and experiences

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Evidence-based evaluation instruments for course units offer academics quality data, useful for continual improvement. Placement units are not traditional course units and may require a specific evaluation instrument, of which none seem available. This study commenced the development of a placement evaluation instrument supported by a relevant learning framework. The qualitative study was conducted (n=56) and examined the views of placement stakeholders regarding what attributes of the placement experience should be evaluated. Data were thematically analyzed, leading to a 25 item evaluation instrument. This instrument can be completed by students to evaluate and improve placement experiences and outcomes. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 2012, 13(4), 225-238)

Keywords: work placements, placement evaluation instrument, socio-emotional selectivity theory, meaning maintenance model, determinants of learning

Work placements, in which students apply the knowledge and skills they have acquired in the classroom to authentic settings (Bleetman & Webb, 2008), have become a key feature of many university courses (Coll & Zegwaard, 2006; Wilkinson, 2008). Despite the benefits of these opportunities, placement settings vary appreciably from one another (Bullock, Gould, Hejmadi, & Lock, 2009; Owen & Stupans, 2009).

Accordingly, placement settings and experiences need to be evaluated rigorously. To do so, there are several challenges to consider. First, given the diversity of placements, the development of an evaluation instrument needs to take the views of all placement stakeholder groups into account. In practice though, it is expected that enrolled students would be the main users of the instrument to assess a range of placement factors related both to the university and organization. Second, researchers and practitioners need to reach a consensus on the learning objectives that are aligned to all placement experiences. Third, researchers and practitioners need to reach agreement on the primary determinants of these learning objectives. Finally, they need to translate these primary determinants into tangible features that are able to be observed and assessed by students.

To resolve these issues, we first explicate a conceptual framework, primarily derived from socio-emotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1995, 2006) and the meaning maintenance model (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Proulx & Heine, 2006) which are highly aligned to the challenges described above. This framework differentiates four key determinants of learning that need to be cultivated in placement settings. Next, we report a qualitative study,

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conducted to garner the opinions and insights of key placement stakeholder groups on the main features of exemplary placements. Finally, to construct a suitable evaluation instrument, we integrate this conceptual framework with the qualitative data.

PLACEMENT EVALUATIONS

Many scholars and practitioners have underscored the benefits of placements (e.g., Bleetman & Webb, 2008; Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick, & Cragnolini, 2004). Placements can also be referred to as practicum, internships, apprenticeships, industry-based learning, work-integrated learning, and fieldwork (e.g., Gibson, Brodie, Sharpe, Wong, Deane, & Fraser, 2002; Hay & O'Donoghue, 2009; Reeders, 2000). Many researchers recognize that students learn most effectively while they apply the principles they have been taught in the classroom to authentic settings and, subsequently, critically reflect upon these experiences (for a seminal paper, see Kolb & Fry, 1975). These experiences do not only consolidate, clarify, and extend the principles that students learn in the classroom but also facilitate the acquisition of generic skills (Bridgstock, 2009)—that is, the skills that are germane to most work environments (e.g., Murakami, Murray, Sims & Chedzey, 2009; Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher, & Pretto, 2008). These generic skills include critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration in teams, effective communication, personal resilience, and professional conduct (e.g., Bates, 2005). Because of the importance of these skills to employability, placements are integral to many courses.

The positive findings discussed above, however, may overshadow some of the intractable problems of placements. Specifically, some work environments could, potentially, impede the learning of students. For example, in some organizations, managers do not promulgate a shared, compelling, or inspiring vision of the future (Avolio & Bass, 2004). In these environments, students tend to focus more on the standards they need to fulfil instead of the skills or expertise they could acquire (Coad & Berry, 1998). This orientation has been shown to compromise, and not expedite, the learning and development of individuals, especially in demanding settings (Covington & Omelich, 1984).

To ensure that placement experiences are beneficial, university placement supervisors/coordinators need to clarify the characteristics and practices of organizations and placement units in general that facilitate, rather than impede, learning and development. In addition, these supervisors need to be able to reliably and consistently assess these characteristics and practices in placement settings.

To fulfil these goals, university placement supervisors/coordinators may want to construct their own instruments, to accommodate the unique features of their specific course. However, to ensure the sample size is sufficient to validate and to refine this instrument, it may be necessary to collect data over many years. Instead, scholars could develop one instrument that is applicable to all disciplines but can be tailored if necessary. This broader perspective would also provide the benefit of benchmarking within and across universities to facilitate strategic continuous improvement.

OVERARCHING OBJECTIVES OF ALL PLACEMENTS

To construct an effective evaluation instrument, at least three challenges need to be considered and resolved. First, the particular aims of specific placements vary appreciably across disciplines and universities. Accordingly, the characteristics and practices of

organizations that enable students to achieve these aims may also vary considerably, precluding the construction of a standardized instrument. To override this potential complication, scholars need to identify the objectives that are relevant to all placement settings.

Socio-emotional selectivity theory, proposed by Carstensen (1995, 2006) can be applied to characterize this shared objective. According to this theory, when individuals perceive their identity—including their values, goals, pursuits, and interests—as transient, their primary motivation is to enhance their immediate state rather than accommodate their future needs (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999). That is, because their values, goals, and interests are not enduring, these individuals do not feel any allegiance or devotion to their future identity (Bartels & Urminsky, 2011). Therefore, they often yield to their urges, temptations, and preferences, manifesting as impulsive behavior (Bartels & Urminsky, 2011; Ersner-Hershfield, Garton, Ballard, Samanez-Larkin, & Knutson, 2009).

To illustrate, before major life transitions, epitomized by the shift from university to work, individuals are also more likely to bias their focus to pleasant rather than negative features (Pruzan & Isaacowitz, 2006; see also DeWall, Visser, & Levitan, 2006). This bias enhances the mood and emotions of these individuals (for studies that reject alternative accounts, see Fung & Carstensen, 2004).

This pronounced aversion to negative emotions, however, tends to impede learning and development. For example, when individuals undertake activities that diverge from their previous experience or existing knowledge (as often occurs when undertaking work placement), they tend to experience anxiety and similar emotions (Kuhl, 2000; Kuhl, Kazen, & Koole, 2006). Individuals who are motivated to prevent negative emotions, therefore, will tend to shun novel or unfamiliar pursuits. Furthermore, when individuals undertake activities that demand careful deliberation, reflection, analysis, and effort, they are more likely to experience dejection or frustration (Kuhl, 2000; see also de Vries, Holland, & Witteman, 2009). Hence, individuals who are motivated to prevent negative emotions will not embrace such deliberation, impeding both learning and development (Kanfer & Ackerman, 1989).

In contrast, when individuals perceive their values, goals, and interests as enduring, they become especially motivated to pursue their future needs (Carstensen et al., 1999). They strive to accrue resources—knowledge, skills, networks, and materials, for example—rather than enhance their immediate state (Carstensen, 2006). Because they are not as inclined to enhance their immediate mood, they are more receptive to activities that feel novel and unfamiliar or demand effort and deliberation. They are, therefore, more willing and able to learn effectively and to develop their skills (Carstensen, 2006).

From the perspective of socio-emotional selectivity theory, the overarching objective of work placements may be to foster the motivation of individuals to accrue resources rather than to enhance their immediate state (cf., Harvey & Green, 1993). This perspective offers two key advantages. First, this objective to accrue resources—and thus to embrace novel opportunities, deliberate carefully, and mobilize effort—has been shown to underpin the acquisition of all skills and abilities. When individuals embrace novelty, they are more likely to orient their attention to unfamiliar information. When they deliberate carefully and invoke working memory, they can more readily integrate these diverse sources of information (Engle, 2002). Finally, if they mobilize sufficiently, they can assimilate these insights with pre-existing

knowledge (Greene, 1989). These three processes are integral to learning and development (Mayer, 2001, 2005, 2008). The second advantage of this perspective is that many studies have examined the conditions and practices that facilitate this objective. Accordingly, if the objective of placements is to increase the motivation of students to accrue resources, scholars can readily delineate the practices and policies that are likely to facilitate learning and development.

DETERMINANTS OF LEARNING

To summarize, according to socio-emotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 2006), individuals are motivated to accrue skills, knowledge, and other resources whenever they perceive their identity—including their values, goals, pursuits, and interests—as stable and enduring. Taking this concept further, whether or not individuals conceptualize their identity as stable and enduring may, primarily, depend on the extent to which they perceive their life as meaningful. That is, if individuals experience a sense of meaning, they feel that all of their goals and activities are intended to pursue an enduring and significant purpose or aspiration (Debats, Drost, & Hansen, 1995). They feel their values, pursuits, and interests will remain stable over time (Bartels & Urminsky, 2011). The characteristics and practices of organizations that facilitate meaning and purpose should, therefore, expedite learning and development.

The meaning maintenance model delineates four key determinants of meaning and purpose (Heine et al., 2006; for a comparable taxonomy, see Baumeister, 1991). First, if individuals feel that people in their environment are supportive, cooperative, and moral, they are more likely to perceive their life as meaningful and coherent (Heine et al., 2006). That is, in some environments, people behave unsupportively and breach moral standards. Individuals, therefore, are not certain whether their attempts to help other people will be reciprocated (cf., Lerner, 1980). Because of this apparent uncertainty, these individuals direct their attention more to protecting their safety than to pursuing enduring aspirations (Schmidt & DeShon, 2007), compromising their sense of meaning.

Many studies have shown that a supportive, cooperative, and moral environment fosters meaning. For example, during social activities, when individuals feel excluded rather than supported, they report a diminishing sense of purpose in life (Stillman, Baumeister, Lambert, Crescioni, DeWall, & Fincham, 2009). Furthermore, to cultivate a sense of meaning, individuals attempt to inflate the extent to which they perceive their environment as moral (Proulx & Heine, 2008). They express moral outrage towards minor transgressions. For example, when exposed to incongruous sets of words—a protocol that challenges meaning and order—individuals become more inclined to recommend harsher punishments to anyone who breaches social conventions (Randles, Proulx, & Heine, 2010). This moral outrage reinforces the assumption that most people are ethical and cooperative.

Second, to foster a sense of meaning, individuals like to perceive their environment as unambiguous, predictable, and certain (Heine et al., 2006). They seek contexts in which they understand their duties and can predict the events that are likely to unfold (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). In these environments, individuals feel they can readily fulfil their duties, diminishing the likelihood of unforeseen problems (cf., Higgins, 1999) and thus enabling individuals to orient their attention to future aspirations instead of immediate protection (Schmidt & DeShon, 2007). Indeed, as research indicates, to restore

their sense of meaning, individuals will gravitate to predictable and unambiguous environments (Proulx & Heine, 2009).

Third, to foster meaning, individuals like to construct a coherent worldview (Proulx & Heine, 2006). Specifically, they want to understand which achievements will be eternally valued by society. They want to know which of their endeavours will be rewarded in the future and, perhaps, what they will be remembered for in the long-term (Landau, Kosloff, & Schmeichel, 2010). Once individuals have formed this understanding, they know which aspirations may be rewarded. They become more inclined to commit to these enduring goals, instilling a sense of purpose.

Many studies have confirmed the importance of these coherent worldviews. That is, to restore their sense of meaning, individuals will often reinforce these worldviews. For example, when people reflect on their mortality, threatening their sense of meaning, they become more inclined to reject opinions that diverge from their worldview (for a review, see Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2004). Likewise, if individuals are exposed to subliminal words that are synonymous with pointless—words that challenge their sense of meaning unconsciously—they become more likely to assume their achievements will be cherished infinitely (Van Tongreen & Green, 2010). In a work placement context, these findings suggest the importance of providing students with rewarding and significant tasks to ensure their sense of meaning is maintained.

Finally, to cultivate a sense of meaning, individuals like to feel they can accomplish some of the endeavours that are valued by society (Heine et al., 2006). They want to believe they can achieve the aspirations that will be rewarded in the future. They like to perceive themselves as capable and adaptable, for example (Baumeister, 1991). Consistent with this premise, if their sense of meaning is threatened, individuals tend to inflate their self esteem. That is, they become more likely to perceive themselves as worthy and capable (Van Tongreen & Green, 2010).

FEATURES OF PLACEMENT SETTINGS THAT CORRESPOND WITH DETERMINANTS OF LEARNING

According to the meaning maintenance model (Heine et al., 2006), individuals are likely to experience a sense of meaning, and are thus more inspired to develop their knowledge and skills, when they feel their social environment is cooperative, perceive the context as predictable, believe they understand which pursuits will be valued in the future, and respect their own capabilities. Placement organizations and universities providing these placements, therefore, need to cultivate these conditions.

Nevertheless, to construct an instrument that can be administered to evaluate placement settings, these four overarching determinants of meaning need to be translated into specific features and assessable characteristics. To fulfil this goal, key placement stakeholder groups, were asked to identify the characteristics of placement settings that, in their view, facilitate student learning. Next, features that correspond to one or more of the four determinants of meaning and learning were extracted. Features that could hinder one of these determinants were excluded. This process identified 25 attributes of placement settings that could promote learning. Finally, each of these attributes was expressed as a specific question, generating an instrument that comprises 25 questions.

One potential limitation of this approach to be mindful of is that stakeholders could overlook one or more of these determinants of meaning (cf., Harvey & Green 1993). To demonstrate, some determinants of meaning are more specific or tangible than others (cf., Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007). For example, a specific policy, including a detailed placement agreement, could stipulate the precise duties of students, ensuring their obligations are unambiguous and predictable. Likewise, tangible activities, such as a course on project management, could increase the likelihood that students perceive themselves as capable and adaptable. In contrast, whether or not the environment is cooperative, supportive, and moral cannot be reduced to a few specific policies or tangible events. Even if people observe some altruistic acts, they cannot be certain the environment is cooperative. After all, individuals may help someone merely to cultivate trust and may exploit this person later. Similarly, whether or not their worldview is coherent cannot be reduced to a few specific, tangible features.

Interestingly, when individuals experience a sense of power—for example, when they are granted the opportunity to evaluate other people and delegate tasks—their attention tends to be more oriented towards abstract concepts rather than tangible details. They become more aware of global patterns or unobservable regularities than specific features of the workplace (Smith & Trope, 2006). They may, therefore, become aware of whether the environment is moral or whether their worldview is coherent. In contrast, as their sense of power diminishes, individuals become more likely to direct their attention to specific features instead (Smith & Trope, 2006). They become more cognizant of whether their duties are unambiguous or whether their capabilities are advanced (Smith, Wigboldus & Dijksterhuis, 2008).

This study attempted to address this issue by recruiting a diverse range of participants. We sought the opinions and insights of enrolled students and past students—individuals who are unlikely to be assigned positions of power. We also sought the opinions and insights of industry partners, especially individuals who have supervised placement students, as well as university placement supervisors/coordinators. These individuals are more likely to be assigned positions of power. This diversity increased the likelihood that participants would consider all four determinants of meaning.

Besides power, other individual characteristics, such as individualism and collectivism, could affect the salience of these determinants. Specifically, in collectivist environments, individuals are more sensitive to the importance of social harmony and social obligations (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Ybarra & Trafimow, 1998). They will, therefore, naturally orient more of their attention to whether the environment is cooperative and moral or whether their social duties are unambiguous and predictable. In individualist environments, individuals are more sensitive to the importance of achievement and agency (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Stapel & Van der Zee, 2006). They may, consequently, be more concerned about whether their achievements will be rewarded in the future (cf., Lee, Aaker, & Gardner, 2000), increasing the perceived importance of a coherent worldview and personal capabilities.

The industry in which individuals operate can affect whether a collectivist or individualist orientation prevails. For instance, it is expected that the university environment would be more focused on fostering learning and development. This orientation to learning has been shown to foster a cooperative mindset, potentially evoking a collectivist orientation (e.g., Porter, 2005). In other industries, an individualistic orientation may be more dominant. Therefore, in this study, participants were recruited both from the university environment, including the enrolled students and university placement supervisors/coordinators, and from industry (organization supervisors and past students).

METHOD

Participants

Four stakeholder groups responded to a series of qualitative questions. First, six industry partners, all of whom had supervised placement students, participated in telephone interviews. Second, 16 past students of Deakin University completed an online survey. All of these students had completed placements in previous years. Third, 14 placement supervisors/coordinators at Deakin University also completed an online survey. Finally, 20 students who were enrolled in units that include a placement also participated: twelve of these students were enrolled in the Masters of Organizational Psychology and participated in a single focus group. The remaining students, studying a range of disciplines, were interviewed over the telephone.

Questions

All participants were asked similar questions. Individuals were asked to specify the “indicators of a successful placement experience”. They were also asked to list/ state the skills that students develop on placement. Finally, they were asked to indicate the features or attributes of placements they feel should be evaluated.

Data Analysis

The answers to these questions were then subjected to thematic analysis (e.g., Roulston, 2001). Specifically, the thematic analysis comprised six phases, corresponding to the recommendations by Braun and Clarke (2006). Two researchers skimmed the data and then read this material in detail, several times, while recording provisional ideas or impressions. Then, these researchers assigned codes to chunks of data that seemed important, interesting, or insightful. Similarities or relationships between codes were then explored to identify themes. The two researchers then discussed and reconciled any disparities in their codes and themes. They applied the final set of codes and themes to the data again, modifying and clarifying these themes whenever necessary. Finally, the themes were examined in relation to the four factors that constitute the meaning maintenance model.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Construction of Evaluation Instrument

The thematic analysis uncovered 25 specific themes—that is, 25 features or outcomes of placement settings that could instil a sense of meaning and thus motivate students to accrue knowledge, skills, and other resources. The majority of the themes were mentioned by members of all four stakeholder groups. These themes were then translated into questions that could be utilized in the future to evaluate placement experiences, generating 25 questions. In addition, three other questions were included to assess overall student satisfaction, culminating in 28 questions.

Table 1 summarizes the data. Each row corresponds to one question of the instrument. These questions appear in the first column. The second column represents the theme that underpinned each question. The third column presents a quotation that epitomizes each theme. The final column specifies the determinant of meaning, and thus learning, that corresponds to this theme.

TABLE 1. Questions that could be included on an evaluation instrument and themes that emerged from the data.

	Question	Theme	Illustrative quote	Determinant of meaning
1.	The placement unit provided me with the opportunity to gain relevant industry/work experience.	Real world experience	"...gain[ed] an insight into the working environment; how life after uni will be..." (enrolled student)	Capability
2.	The placement unit provided me with the opportunity to develop industry/work relevant skills.	Knowledge gained	"An increase in industry knowledge." (past student)	Capability
3.	The placement unit provided me with the opportunity to apply industry or work relevant skills.	Student skill	"Students are given the opportunity to 'grow' in their placement, acquiring and implementing new skill." (university placement supervisor/coordinator)	Capability
4.	The placement unit provided me with the opportunity to utilise my course related skills and knowledge.	Application of knowledge	"[The] ability to apply some theoretical knowledge...[the] ability to discuss with their organizational supervisor the theory they feel would be applicable to an issue." (past student)	Capability
5.	The placement unit enhanced my relationship building skills.	Relationship building and management	"Proven stakeholder management is important." (industry partner)	Cooperation and morality
6.	The placement unit enabled me to expand my professional network.	Networking	"Establishing connections with key industry contacts." (past student)	Cooperation and morality
7.	The placement unit enhanced my ability to communicate (e.g., presentations, report writing, proposals) in a work environment.	Communication skills	"...Ability to contribute and communicate...communicating to all of the people in which they have dealings with...such as reasonably senior key stakeholders" (industry partner)	Capability
8.	The placement unit enhanced my skills in time management.	Time management	"They would give us the project to develop our own skills like priority management and time management and their support would be there if it was needed." (enrolled student)	Capability
9.	The placement unit enhanced my skills in project management (e.g., project planning, organizing resources, working according to project timeline etc.).	Project management	"Organizational skills...such as multi-tasking" (past student)	Capability
10.	The placement unit enhanced my teamwork skills.	Teamwork	"Functioning within a multi-discipline team." (university placement supervisor/coordinator)	Cooperation and morality
11.	The placement unit fostered my skills in managing professional and ethical issues.	Ethics	"...maintaining privacy and confidentiality, how other members refer to patients." (enrolled student)	Cooperation and morality
12.	The placement unit enhanced my understanding of organizations and how they operate.	Organizational functioning	"Learning about the political and business environment." (industry partner)	Capability
13.	The placement unit improved my confidence.	Confidence	"I think it helps with confidence too, like my first placement I didn't know what I was doing and then now it's just like I feel like I can do things on my own and I don't have to ask of any person" (enrolled student)	Capability
14.	The placement unit advanced my personal development goals (e.g. assertiveness, interpersonal skills, resilience).	Personal development	"Ability to deal with emotional demands of the job." (industry partner)	Capability

15.	The placement unit assisted me to set my career goals.	Clearer career path	"Having a clearer idea about where you're headed after the course is complete." (past student)	Cohesive worldview
16.	The supervision and support I received from the [placement] organization was satisfactory.	Organizational supervision	"[having a] supportive supervisor in the organization." (past student)	Cooperation and morality
17.	The supervision and support I received from the university for my placement was satisfactory	University supervision	"[receiving] student support from University." (past student)	Cooperation and morality
18.	When required, there was useful consultation between the university and the organization.	Face-to-face coordination	"I also meet with the placement coordinator to gather qualitative and quantitative feedback regarding student competencies." (industry partner)	Unambiguous duties
19.	I received adequate preparation for my placement experience from the university.	Pre-placement assessments or training	"Students are observed whilst on training and they receive supervision, guidance, and coaching...Students will have their gaps in knowledge assessed." (industry partner)	Unambiguous duties
20.	The university organized the placement effectively.	Clear and aligned expectations	"...meeting agency expectations...communication is clear and that agencies do not walk away from the experience disappointed or without the tangible outcome they were looking for." (university placement supervisor/coordinator)	Unambiguous duties
21.	The organization was well prepared and organized for the placement.	Pre-placement preparation at the organization	"There should be questions about how prepared the organization was to take on the student." (enrolled student)	Unambiguous duties
22.	The feedback I received from the university placement staff during the placement unit was helpful for my development.	Feedback provided from university	"We also worked on a project whilst on placement and there should be an evaluation of the project." (enrolled student)	Unambiguous duties
23.	The feedback I received from my placement organizational supervisor during the placement was helpful for my development.	Feedback provided from organization	"The confidential feedback from the internship organization host." (university placement supervisor/coordinator)	Unambiguous duties
24.	Assessment tasks for the placement unit provided me with the opportunity to reflect and learn.	Assessment tasks	"[The] student or intern has articulated and evaluated what they have experienced and learnt via a reflective Internship Journal." (industry partner)	Capabilities
25.	I was able to make a meaningful contribution to the placement organization on my placement.	Student contribution	"Evidence that the student has worked on tangible projects and leaves a legacy item." (industry partner)	Coherent worldview
26.	My expectations for the placement unit were met.	-		NA – overall satisfaction
27.	I was satisfied with the quality of my placement experience.	-		NA – overall satisfaction
28.	I worked as hard as I could to achieve my goals during the placement unit.	-		NA – overall satisfaction

NB. The term *placement* could be supplanted with a more suitable phrase, depending on the administration context of the instrument. Participants could be instructed to specify the extent to which they agree or disagree with each statement on a rating scale.

The items demonstrated a strong alignment to the four determinants of meaning, as defined by the meaning maintenance model (Heine et al., 2006). Six of the items epitomize the first determinant of meaning: a supportive, cooperative, and moral social environment. In particular, three of these items correspond to practices that may enhance the capacity of students to collaborate and to cooperate effectively with colleagues in the future. These capacities may facilitate the formation of relationships, enhancing trust and thus increasing the degree to which individuals feel supported (Gurtman, 1992; Sabatelli, Buck, & Dreyer, 1983). Two of the items relate to the extent to which students felt supported during the placement experience. This support could generalize to trust in other work settings as well (Rotter, 1971; see also Paulssen, 2009). Finally, one item concerned the degree to which the placement reinforced ethical principles—principles that reinforce the moral imperatives of this industry.

In addition, five of the items revolved around practices that, arguably, clarify the duties and obligations of placement students. Some of these items related to the degree to which the placement had been organized and planned adeptly, increasing the likelihood that roles and duties were allocated unambiguously. Other items related to the extent to which students received constructive feedback, ensuring that students understood whether or not they had fulfilled the expectations of both the placement organization and the university. When these expectations are unambiguous, students feel they can divert their attention to future aspirations, instilling a sense of meaning (Schmidt & DeShon, 2007).

Only two of the items seemed to relate to a cohesive worldview. That is, these items represented practices that may orient attention to enduring aspirations and achievements—achievements that are likely to be valued and rewarded in the future. One of these items revolved around discussions of career goals and aspirations. The other related to whether individuals felt their contributions to the organizations were meaningful and enduring.

Finally, twelve of the items represented practices that may enhance the capability and confidence of individuals. These items revolved around the acquisition and application of specific work skills, applicable to a particular industry, generic work skills including project management, interpersonal skills such as assertiveness, and intrapersonal capabilities, including resilience.

Feedback on the Final Instrument

This instrument was then distributed to a subset of participants as well as other individuals, including recent graduates and university staff members with an interest in placement. The feedback was positive, as exemplified by the following quotations:

I've reviewed the tool and think it hits the appropriate notes i.e., [it] addresses the unique aspects of work integrated learning... (university staff member with an interest in placement)

Overall, I really like the instrument, I think it is great... (industry partner)

I think this draft is very thorough covering the important aims of the work integrated learning units... I think the layout and rating system with the opportunity for comments is going to be useful in rating the important aspects of placement units for both the students and the university. (enrolled student)

Some of these individuals proposed the term “placement” should be supplanted with an alternative term, such as “work-integrated learning”. Consequently, we recommend that university placement supervisors/coordinators replace the term “placement” with whichever phrase they feel is applicable to their setting/unit.

An initial trial of the instrument yielded positive results. Specifically, twenty two students completing placements within the Master of Psychology (Industrial and Organizational) course at Deakin University were asked to complete the instrument and provide feedback and improvement suggestions. No specific improvements were suggested and the feedback that was provided was positive as illustrated by the following quotes:

Good structure & addresses all relevant areas.

I feel that it asked appropriate questions so no other suggested improvements.

Despite these initial positive indications, the next steps for research in this area will be to conduct extensive trials of the instrument with larger samples to confirm its reliability and validity.

CONCLUSION

The 25 items represent features or outcomes of placement settings that are likely to cultivate a sense of meaning and purpose in students. When students experience this sense of meaning, they are likely to perceive their goals, values, and pursuits as enduring. Consequently, students become especially motivated to accrue skills, knowledge, and other resources, stemming impulsive behaviour (Carstensen, 1995, 2006).

Future research will need to extensively trial the instrument with larger samples and across different disciplines to confirm the reliability and validity of this instrument. First, when several students are assigned to the same placement organization, inter-rater reliability could be established. However, it is important to be aware that students who are assigned to the same organization may not experience the same conditions. The quality of relationships between students and supervisors, a key determinant of satisfaction, often differs between individuals (cf., Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). These variations might bias measures of inter-rater reliability.

Second, to establish criterion validity, a suitable measure of learning and development needs to be identified. For example, researchers could examine whether the suitability of placement settings, as gauged by this evaluation instrument, correlate with performance on subsequent placements—perhaps after controlling pre-existing characteristics such as previous grades.

Finally, to establish predictive validity, researchers could examine whether suitability of placement settings correlates with future satisfaction and career progress. That is, suitable placements, as defined by the meaning maintenance model, should foster a sense of purpose in students, potentially expediting their learning and development in the future.

Work placements are more complex than standard university subjects as they involve multiple relationships, diversity of settings and experiences and are intended to facilitate the development of generic skills. The development of an evaluation instrument represents a positive step towards understanding and addressing common challenges associated with

reliably capturing placement evaluation data and improving placement learning outcomes. Furthermore, such an approach is highly amenable in facilitating strategic improvement not only at the individual student level but for all placement stakeholders including the university and placement organizations themselves.

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