Professional placements

The information on these pages has been developed as part of the Teaching International Students project

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1. Introduction

Many university courses include a professional (or 'practical') placement, a period of work-based learning or an internship, generally undertaken during the Summer. These sometimes must be successfully completed in order to pass the course and be accredited to work in professions such as education, social work and allied health professions such as nursing, psychology, pharmacy, physiotherapy, occupational therapy etc. Many courses include opportunities for work-based learning placements for short or longer term periods such as in business, architecture, engineering and the sports sciences. Professional placements are an opportunity for international students to learn more about the broader community and profession and to practise their skills so it is important that they are well organised and managed. There is a significant difference, however, between the context of a professional placement, which clearly leads to a professional qualification, and work-based learning/work experience placements which may not even be assessed.

Professional placements are as much about gaining an insight and understanding of the culture and language of that profession as gaining technical skill and experience. It is also in the interest of the placement organisation to be broadly supportive as these students will become their future workforce pool. As such, agreeing a programme of experience and opportunities within the time allocated is often also influenced, and sometimes clearly stated, by the relevant professional body.

International students can also be assisted to prepare for professional practice within their own country by providing opportunities for an international placement, international internship or a placement in a more socially and culturally diverse location or by offering the option of an assignment topic on the professional requirements in their home country. These options can also be offered to home students.

Increasingly international students are seeking further international experiences during their period of study and may wish to pursue Study Abroad opportunities during their stay or international placements and internships. International internships are also very popular with home students and enables them to build their knowledge, intercultural skills and their CV.

2. The main issues: Getting started

Professional placements can provide challenges and anxieties for most students but for international students can be compounded by issues of language, background knowledge and cultural differences and can result in even more intense 'culture shock' (Spooner-Lane, Tangen & Campbell, 2009). There can be a gap between the expectations of the student (home or international), the university (often a placement team rather than individual lecturers) and the host organisation. Students are outside the relatively safe and understanding university environment and may have considerable accountability for their actions, given that they are dealing with real students or real patients. Many international students have very positive experiences during their professional placement but some encounter problems and this may be the time when difficulties and 'differences' really come to the fore and need to be prevented or dealt with quickly so that international students have their best chances of success. Professional placements can be daunting for international students and even an insurmountable obstacle with some students withdrawing from their courses at this point (Carpenter, 2005). Spooner-Lane, Tangen and Campbell (2009) argue that a differentiated mode of professional practicum delivery that has greater in-built support is required for international students.

2.1 What are the major difficulties for students?

International students may struggle with professional or vernacular language while on placement or may face discrimination based on accent and credibility problems (Miller, 2010). The students in Spooner-Lane, Tangen and Campbell's (2009) study reported that their level of English proficiency was a greater barrier than they had expected. As Slethaug (2007) argues, as well as being expected to adapt to local curriculum, unfamiliar

systems, new pedagogy and expectations, international students need to negotiate unknown workplace conditions and behaviours. Many 'home grown' pre-service teachers, for example, will have had up to 12 years first-hand experience of schools as pupils and be familiar with many of the practices and customs of the local school classroom and schoolyard. School students can be notoriously unwelcoming of student teachers especially if they appear vulnerable or ill at ease, not in full command of professional or English language vocabulary, or have a 'funny accent'. As Campbell, O'Gorman, Tangen, Spooner-Lane and Alford (2008) point out, when pre-service teachers are under stress they tend to resort to familiar behaviours from their own schooling experience which may not be appropriate in the new setting. These stressors can exacerbate feelings of loss of confidence and self-esteem and need careful management by the student's university- and placement-based supervisors or mentors. A placement can be highly emotive and high risk especially when passing the placement is essential for passing the course.

Beyond issues of language and background knowledge are issues of cultural and professional identity. Many international students will undergo profound challenges and changes to their identities and may feel uneasy about having to comply with local customs and expectations. For some this can be a liberating and transformative process as long as they are given space and respect to deal with these changes in a supportive environment. This may not be the case in a professional placement where other imperatives apply and where the focus is on delivery of services to clients and the possession of a set of professional competencies. Most students facing their first professional placement will be anxious about having to portray a professional identity and not yet having the complete knowledge that will be required. The need to demonstrate both professional and language competencies in a work-based environment will put additional pressures and anxieties on many international students.

2.2 Working with the placement location

The professional placement or internship location may be less inclusive and supportive of international students or understanding of their learning needs. Universities may need to take a leading role with affiliated agencies to explain the strengths that international students bring such as cultural sensitivity, bi- or even multi-lingualism, and knowledge of the different mores of the cultures that make up the client base of the profession. Some international students report feeling unwelcome in professional placements and even being subject to overt discrimination. Such instances may require careful intervention by the university liaison and teaching staff and negotiation of solutions or, as a last resort, an alternative placement. Most placement liaison officers build up a good picture over time of locations and individual supervisors, so it may be possible to allocate international students to more supportive locations and supervisors.

In many courses, placement coordinators have trouble finding enough placements to take students, and this can be especially difficult where the placement location may be concerned about the student's level of English or familiarity with local needs. This is particularly the case in courses that train international students to be English language teachers and who need experience working in classrooms. It can also be a concern in other professions such as in the allied health field where students may be working with vulnerable groups of clients with complex needs.

Campbell, O'Gorman, Tangen, Spooner-Lane and Alford (2008) argue that universities that recruit international students have an ethical responsibility to provide adequate support to them including during professional placements. Nevertheless, university or placement supervisors may have concerns about the student's level of language proficiency, background knowledge and communication skills, but adequate support needs to be given to ensure that students have the opportunities to develop these. University-based supervisors may be confronted with difficult issues such as when to 'step in' if there are problems, especially when there is friction between the student and their placement supervisor; how much support to provide; what are the core and non-negotiable competencies and the developmental nature of these (different standards may be needed at different points in time during the student's course of study).

International students may be reticent about admitting their difficulties and may try to 'soldier on' and may get into considerable distress before the problem is apparent, especially while the student is not on campus

(although this also applies to home students). Many have very positive experiences, however, and are highly competent in the professional context. International students, like all students, have multi-dimensional lives so they may encounter issues that have nothing to do with the fact that they are an international student but may be due to very different issues or issues of a personal nature.

2.3 Assessment of the professional placement

International students may decide to work in the host country after graduation or may return to their home country to practise, or may travel to work elsewhere. Although they may not wish to work locally after graduation their competencies will be assessed as if they do and in the same way as home students (who may also wish to work internationally). Many academics believe that professional placements need to conform to strict requirements of the professional accreditation bodies who set these competencies yet many registration bodies are very supportive of a diverse workforce and may be more accommodating of a greater range of experiences and skills in the profession (Ryan & Struhs, 2004; Struhs & Ryan, 2003).

3. Possible solutions: Suggestions for action

University lecturers and placement supervisors can do much to ensure that their international students can successfully undertake the professional placement.
These include:

3.1 Working with professional placement staff

- Proactively develop relationships with professional and placement staff in the placement location and explicitly discuss the needs and strengths of international students with placement-based mentors and supervisors

- Provide written guidance or regular briefing sessions to workplace supervisors on the needs and expectations of international students (while taking care not to construct them as 'problematic')

- Provide explicit guidance to placement supervisors (both university- and work-based) on effective support, encouragement and feedback and on what to do if things go wrong during the placement

- In written guidance to supervisors/mentors, explain the developmental nature of the student's language and professional knowledge and the expected level at that point in time

3.2 Preparing students for the professional placement

- Encourage students to openly discuss their fears and concerns prior to the placement

- Provide pre-placement training on communicating their needs with the host/supervisor and on how to respond to critical feedback

- Workshop or role play possible tensions or conflicts and help students to build their own skills of negotiation and conflict management and effective communication when dealing with difficult issues during the placement

- Work with students on their communication skills, including if necessary with language pronunciation and intelligibility (suggest that they audiotape themselves and practise)

- Consider placing students with either a co-national or a home student peer. If there are multiple numbers of students at the workplace, consider including peer support and de-briefing as part of the learning and assessment requirements

- Develop a resource bank of case stories from previous students offering advice and guidance about possible tensions and challenges and how they addressed these ('My tips for a successful placement')

3.3 Dealing with issues that arise during the placement

- Encourage students to provide feedback on their placement or to report any significant issues such as discrimination.

- Immediately follow up any significant issues with the staff at the placement location and tackle any unresolved or ongoing issues at the programme or course level.

- If students are experiencing significant personal stress that is affecting their emotional health and well-being (which in turn may impair their performance and language fluency) consider deferring the placement, offering an alternate placement or offering assistance in negotiating their difficulties during the placement.

- Provide class time for de-briefing sessions to address any unresolved issues, to reflect on and build on learning (both positive and negative) and to identify issues that may be idiosyncratic of one context.

3.4 Assessment of the placement

- Carefully consider what are the core elements and requirements of the placement and which elements can be flexible or negotiable.

- In earlier placements, consider assessing the amount of learning and personal development that has taken place during the placement, rather than assessing all students against the same criteria.

- If an international student has received a poor assessment for the placement by a mentor or clinical supervisor, this may need to be moderated by member of university staff if it appears that irrelevant or discriminatory attitudes are present.

4. Top tip

Provide online Q&A banks drawn from previous students' experiences ('What you should do if this happens…') or online discussion forums during the placement so that students and staff can discuss issues and solutions either with their university supervisor or with each other. Other students are often their best source of advice and support.

5. Top resource

Miller, J. (2010). Chinese pre-service teachers in Australia: Language, identity and practice. In J. Ryan & G. Slethaug (Eds.), International education and the Chinese learner. Hong Kong: Hong University Press.

6. What is the evidence?

Further reading

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