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Received 7 October 2010  
Reviewed 24 November  
2010

## REFEREED ARTICLE

# Students on placement: a comparative study

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper seeks to report the outcomes of a survey of LIS students undertaken in Slovenia and Australia on their experience of work placements and the benefits this can bring for enhancing their personal portfolios.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Students were asked to complete a survey prior to undertaking their placement which sought to determine their expectations as to the usefulness and relevance of the placement in enhancing their portfolios and subsequent career prospects. After undertaking their placement, students completed a second survey as to how well the experience fitted with their expectations and its benefits for their portfolios and professional ambitions.

**Findings** – This research confirmed what has generally been reported elsewhere – that placements provide a highly relevant educational experience that is appreciated by students and that generally lives up to their expectations. The fact that there are few substantial differences between the two student cohorts suggests that the findings from this research are an accurate picture of the situation for LIS students more generally. The positive view of the placement and the belief in its role in LIS education is further strengthened by this study.

**Originality/value** – The outcomes from this research will help to inform the nature of the work placement experience – where it fits with expectations and where it does not – and how useful the activity is in giving breadth and depth to a student's portfolio in order to increase its value as a tool when seeking employment. The research has also an important comparative dimension, comparing two geographically distant countries with similar approaches to LIS education, and their experience in using e-portfolios in placements as the part of preparation of students for their future professional careers.

**Keywords** Libraries, Information science, Workplace learning, Education, Australia, Slovenia

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

The concept of combining some level of practical experience with academic learning is widely accepted within a broad range of professional disciplines. From the traditional professions, medicine and law, through to virtually all other vocational degrees, a practicum or internship is incorporated into the learning process. This



may range from a period of a year or more spent in the work place implementing skills learnt in the classroom, to much shorter periods, providing a more modest introduction to the working environment. Often, such hands-on, practical experience is an essential component in becoming qualified to practice a certain skill or profession.

Library and Information Studies (LIS) programs are no exception, with many LIS courses requiring students to undertake some form of practicum as part of their studies in order to gain a better understanding of the link between theory and professional practice. The centrality of the practicum was recognised when it was identified as one of the 12 core themes and topics included in the attempt to form a joint European LIS curriculum (Kajberg and Lørring, 2005).

Usually the practicum or placement involves a number of weeks working in an appropriate LIS environment where students will be exposed to the widest possible range of activities and often, undertake a formal project which can be completed during the placement.

The rationale behind the usually compulsory nature of the practicum subjects is to provide an opportunity for all students, even those who do have relevant work experience, to try something new and broaden their knowledge of the profession as a whole. For students with little or no experience, this placement opportunity may be seen as an essential part of their learning process, providing the context to help consolidate their academic education. Students also often report benefits from such a placement activity with comments referring to their value, particularly in relation to job seeking. Thus Holland (2006) expressed regret that his own training did not include a practicum and felt that the omission left himself, and his peers, considerably under-prepared for the work place; and Rehman and Chaudhry (2005) suggest that practicums not only offer insight into the workplace but also allow students to form significant strategic links within the industry even before they have completed their formal education. Such links not only help their studies but also improve employment possibilities with Berg *et al.* (2009) reporting that in the 1990s increased competition within the (LIS) industry saw students who had been involved in practicums preferred by potential employers. In a competitive job market, “the LIS practicum became an invaluable asset”. Tucker and Torrence (2004) confirm this, noting that many practitioners believe that recent graduates do not have the necessary skills, simply due to lack of applied experience and education – again, emphasising the value of that experience for gaining employment.

As part of many placements, students are required to maintain a learning diary where they reflect on the classroom/work place linkages and other aspects of their workplace learning which then forms the basis of an assessable piece of work. In addition, a learning diary is also frequently used to record their day-to-day activities and the application of their class based learning in the work environment. The information thus gathered can then be used to build and develop their e-portfolios, adding a practical dimension to round out the skills and knowledge already embedded in the portfolio.

### **The value of practicums**

There is a considerable amount of literature on the rationale for seeing work-based or experiential learning as an important addition to academic studies with, for example,

Harris and Bone (1999) talking of “reclaiming of workplaces as legitimate learning environments”. In the LIS field, Alderman and Milne (2005, p. 12) have drawn on the work of psychologist David Kolb, quoting him as concluding that “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” with practicums providing the opportunity for resolving conflicts between the practice and theory; concepts and experience.

Given this emphasis on the link between learning and experience a number of researchers have looked further to understand better the way in which the two interact. One of the major conclusions is the importance of reflection – students or practitioners thinking about what has happened, how it fits in with their experience and how they respond to this knowledge (e.g. by changing behaviours, broadening understanding etc) (Alderman and Milne, 2005, p. 16).

Beard (1995), when discussing the problems of a practical placement, raised the issue that practical placements for students of librarianship are especially problematic as the student, often straight from school, needs experience of the “working world” and its expectations more broadly, as well as those specific to library and information work. These two needs may conflict, resulting in a disconnect for students and frustration for the host institution.

Another issue that may impact on the effectiveness of any practicum is the often perceived “gap” between LIS practitioners and LIS educators. Knowledge sharing and collaboration between the two groups is still limited, although both are aware that there should be a continuum and closer cooperation with a recent report calling for a closer and more mutually satisfying relationship (Pymm and Hider, 2008, p. 93). The different interests and commitments of both groups have tended to hinder the realisation of a common agenda. The collaboration required to establish a successful practicum may be one way to help bridge this gap and can be an unintended but positive spin-off for practitioners, faculty and students alike as such collaboration is also in students’ best interest. In order for the experience to be positive for all parties, each stakeholder must see the benefits and added value of cooperation. Thus in considering outcomes from the placement, while the educational aims for the student are central, they are not the only factors to consider. Some form of “umbrella vision” needs to be created by using the triangle of stakeholders (education institution, host institution and student) involved to identify the added-value of the work placement, practical training and applied research that can come from the practicum (Espelt *et al.*, 2005). In addition, Tucker and Torrence (2004) note that the practicum should focus on areas in which a real student contribution can be made within the limited time frame available, and should exclude those areas in which it is not possible to provide a meaningful experience in the context of an LIS program.

For the host institution, there can be real benefits with a recent survey undertaken in the University of Tennessee reporting that LIS practicum students bring their own motivation to excel and were generally seen as valuable resources for their host institutions (Starmer, 2005). This view is also supported by the feedback received by both the LIS schools involved in this study where, in the vast majority of cases, host institutions in their report back to the LIS school gave highly favourable accounts of their experience hosting a student, readily indicating their willingness to repeat the process in the following year.

The increasing focus on research and evidence-based practice in the LIS field (as elsewhere) is making the possession of research competencies a more fundamental part of the LIS curriculum. The placement with its practical field experience provides an opportunity for students to observe at first hand how research is integrated into the practitioners' world. Gaining a clearer understanding at this early stage in their careers of the impact of research and its importance is likely to create a better realisation by students of the role that research plays and its value to the profession (Berg *et al.*, 2009). Increasingly, small research projects are becoming either part of, or connected to, the practicum, giving a new dimension to this traditional part of LIS education.

An important part of any practicum is the process of reflecting on what has been seen and experienced. How does it fit with existing knowledge? Why is it different or the same as was taught through the text and classroom discourse? As a student, do I need to revisit some of this learning? Is it likely to be the same elsewhere or is there something unique about this particular workplace? By its very nature, such questioning enhances the learning experience and the student's engagement with the profession and may lead to enhanced students' preparedness for more theoretical discussions as their education progresses. This finding was reported by Hansen and Newman (1980) in their investigation into the value of practical experience in the education of archivists. While nearly 30 years old, there is no reason to suggest that this benefit from the practicum should have dissipated over that time.

Other benefits perceived as accruing through the work place experience are more broadly beneficial. Thus Meulemans and Brown (2001) link the importance of practicum in LIS training to the development of information literacy teaching and its importance to the industry. Effective literacy skills are only possible, in their view, if LIS students are adequately immersed in workplace practices. Another study suggested that the practicum may also be the most critical period for students to learn about the information needs of different user groups and their communities and to gain skills working with different cultural groups (Cuban and Hayes, 2001). This was supported in another study which focused on the increasing ethnic diversity among the LIS student population. Kim and Sin (2008) reported the practicum as having a positive impact on improving attitudes and building confidence in students from ethnic minorities. Additionally, they concluded that practicums had a direct, positive effect on the retention of students from minority groups in their studies.

### **E-portfolios**

The practicum's main goal to connect students with the future workplace and reflect on their future professional role can only be achieved through careful preparation, so that students understand what is required of them, and through close supervision throughout the placement. Essentially this translates to a model for supervisors that comprises the stages – planning, training, mentoring and evaluation – and for students develops the phases – awareness, interests, planning and participation (Kelsey and Ramaswamy, 2005). Supporting such a model, the e-portfolio appears to offer considerable benefits as a tool for students' use and through which supervisors can readily monitor progress.

There appears to have been little research on the linkages between practicums and e-portfolios in the LIS field. While the professional advantages of e-portfolios are often enumerated more broadly (e.g. Jafari and Kaufman, 2006; Colyer and Howell, 2002; DiBiase, 2002), there seems to be little exploration as to how placements can be used to help build portfolios. Within the LIS world the connection between e-portfolios and practicums is, it would appear, a relatively unexplored field (see for example Lyons and Freidus, 2004).

As long ago as 2002 Colyer and Howell investigated the potential of e-portfolios in connection with leisure science practicums. They found that the tool significantly improved the learning that students underwent while in the field. Their example showed how critical it was that the e-portfolio be more than a repository for documents but included reflection and identification of skills and recorded experiences drawn from the practicum. Lewis and Baker (2005) provide a similar example in the area of medical education, again with emphasis placed on the value of recording student experience and reflection. Lyons and Freidus (2004) generalize to a greater degree although they restrict themselves to the area of teacher training. Again, they found strong relationships between e-portfolios, enhanced learning and improved interaction between the student and the industry.

DiBiase (2002) takes the additional step of highlighting the values of e-portfolios as a direct link between students and industry, though he is speaking more generally and not in terms of LIS itself. Among the few sources linking e-portfolios with practicums and the information industry are several produced by LIS schools. Hallam and McAllister (2008) outline what they see as a vital role for e-portfolios in the practicum context. With e-portfolios being maintained throughout the whole course, they noted an improved relationship between students and their learning both within the formal educational context and out in the workplace during practicums. Their observations are supported by experiences in the USA (Reznowski and McManus, 2009), and UK (Doig *et al.*, 2006).

Australia's leading professional body, the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) recognizes the importance of e-portfolios as a means of marketing and developing personal skills (Doessel *et al.*, 2009) and see the development of an e-portfolio as one of the key ways a graduating LIS student can best prepare themselves for success in the workplace.

### **The research**

Research on the effectiveness and value of LIS student placements and practicum is scarce. An investigation into student reflections on their practicum experience was undertaken by the University of Alberta, Canada in the late 1990s. A total of 57 students enrolled in practicum component of their LIS course wrote reflective papers on their experience while on placement during 1996/1997. These were subsequently analysed with researchers identifying seven categories or themes emerging from the experience:

- (1) Changing conceptualization of the library and information profession.
- (2) Translating LIS reflections and theory into practice.
- (3) Enhancing self-knowledge.
- (4) Testing career choices.

- 
- (5) Understanding the importance of networking.
  - (6) Building confidence.
  - (7) Growing from students to professional (Samek and Oberg, 1999).

Students on  
placement

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253

Former students' reflections of their practicum was the topic of another study. An online survey was administered to entry-level cataloguers with less than ten years of experience working in major US research libraries. The aim was to gather information on the benefits or otherwise of the practicum in developing cataloguing skills and workplace readiness. Although experiences ranged widely, the majority of respondents felt the practicum was a valuable part of their education and should be formally required within the library science curriculum (Damasco and McGurr, 2008).

In order to add to this understanding and gain a wider picture of LIS students' experience of the practicum and how, more recently, it can assist in developing their e-portfolios, it was decided to undertake a survey of undergraduate LIS students in both Australia and Slovenia. The placement undertaken by undergraduate LIS students at Charles Sturt University in Australia and by undergraduate students at the University of Ljubljana in Slovenia follow very similar lines. They are for three weeks, and both call for a learning diary to be maintained and a reflective essay prepared which considers their work place experience in the context of their classroom learning. They also both create and maintain e-portfolios as part of their ongoing preparation for the workplace. While the placement requirements in both countries were very similar, the researchers sought to gain a clearer picture of the students' expectations and actual experience – were they also similar?

Following discussion between the authors in 2009 it was decided to undertake a study of the undergraduate student cohorts from both universities who were undertaking their LIS placements in 2009. The research was primarily focused on identifying any problem areas related to placements generally that might be revealed by an anonymous survey; examining the similarities and differences between Australian and Slovenian students; comparing expectations before embarking on the placement with the actual experience reported after completion and assessing how their experience may be recorded in their e-portfolios in order to add to their value.

Two survey instruments were developed, the "before" comprising seven questions, the "after" comprising eight questions. Both were delivered online via Survey Monkey and completed anonymously.

In the first survey, six questions required simple responses to a list of options provided, the seventh asked for free-text comment. The second survey did not include a specific free-text comment question but did enable students to add comment if they wished. Of the 60 respondents to this second survey, 11 did add comments. Due to the simple nature of both questionnaires, the first six questions were completed by virtually all students with the free text question in the first survey completed by over 65 per cent. The "after" survey was the same with all questions answered by 100 per cent of the respondents.

## Results

Owing to the timing of the survey and the times of the year that each university sends its students out on placement, a significantly larger number of Slovenian students completed the before and after surveys (see Table I). The figures discussed in this



paper were gathered during a new placement round for Slovenian students and thus contain a number of “before” responses with no corresponding “after” response. This is mainly due to the timing of the data gathering.

Discussion

The anonymity common to surveys such as this has its disadvantages, as opinions cannot be connected to specific students and their situation. However, it does encourage students to be more honest, critical and free in expressing their opinion than they would be if answering on a personal, non-anonymous basis. Thus, while the data gathered provides good information on certain aspects of the placement activity, it is not possible to cross-tabulate certain results in order to identify any relationships between say students’ level of work experience prior to doing their placement and the value they got from the placement. However, the survey results have provided a clear picture as to the perceived and actual benefits of the placement, the level of similarity of experiences and outcomes across both groups and the general support for the experience expressed by students in both groups.

Detailed results of the survey are provided in the Appendix (Tables AI-AXI). Overall, the “before” survey indicated a high level of similarity between the two groups in terms of expectations about the placement and its usefulness to their overall education. Over 80 per cent of both cohorts reported being very positive or quite positive about doing the placement and over 80 per cent of Australian and 90 per cent of Slovenian students agreed or strongly agreed on the importance of the placement to their studies. This was despite a strong difference in the work experience levels of the student body between the two countries. Thus over 80 per cent of Australian LIS students already had more than one year of work experience in a library or related organization, compared with only 7 per cent of Slovenian students. Yet this factor appears to have had little overall influence. The level of this positive expectation is reassuring in confirming that the great majority of students, whether they have some work experience or not, share a belief in the benefits of a practicum component to their course.

In free text comments relating to their expectations, the key topics raised by Slovenian students that they hoped to gain from their placement concerned digital libraries, cataloguing, and dealing with clients. Australians also mentioned these topics but tended to be more general in their response or focused on their own career interests (e.g. “I want to learn more about children’s librarianship”).

Again, once the placement had been completed, there was general satisfaction with the experience. Over 90 per cent of Australian students felt it had been worthwhile or very worthwhile, with 80 per cent reporting it had been better, or a lot better, than their expectations. Comments such as “The practical experience was so valuable as though the final piece of the puzzle had been put in place” and “learned above and beyond my expectations” were common.

Table I.  
Respondents by  
nationality

Slovenian students completing the survey before placement	56
Australian students completing the survey before placement	25
Slovenian students completing the survey after placement	35
Australian students completing the survey after placement	25



Slovenian students were not quite so positive with 83 per cent reporting it had been worthwhile or very worthwhile and 54 per cent reporting it had been better, or a lot better, than their expectations. Some of the reasons reported by Slovenian students for being somewhat disappointed by their placement include the length of time (46 per cent reported three weeks as being too little, compared with only 8 per cent of the Australians), and poor supervision while on placement, with students reporting supervisors being too busy or not well prepared for mentoring. “My tutor was very busy all the time and didn’t have much time for me. And when she had, she criticized everything and everyone”, was one comment; another reported “My tutor was too busy; I had to learn everything by myself. Three weeks was definitely too short” and another summarized it “They could have been better prepared for us”.

In reporting on their placement and responding to the question regarding which of their academic subjects were most useful to their placement, cataloguing was again mentioned regularly by both groups, while many other comments related to their specific placement and were not readily generalisable (although Australian students also mentioned “management” fairly regularly).

The results overall showed that there was a high level of similarity between the two groups in their expectations, and the reality, of their placements. The one difference of any significance was between their satisfaction with the placement itself, which was considerably lower for Slovenian students. Their concerns focused mainly on the level of support available to them in the placement. Given that the options open for students in Slovenia are more limited – there are just fewer institutions and libraries available than in Australia with its much larger population – it may be that a number of the host practitioners (tutors, mentors) were not well prepared and did not properly understand what was expected of them. These findings suggest that more preparation of the host organizations in Slovenia needs to be undertaken and, as a result, a series of training courses have been prepared by the Faculty of Arts at the University of Ljubljana to better inform potential hosts of what is expected from them. The Australian situation is helped by having a dedicated staff member organizing placements who, as part of this role, liaises with potential host organizations. If the organisation is taking on a placement for the first time, it is provided with an information package as to expectations, responsibilities etc. and the supervisors are closely supported in order to ensure that this first experience is a positive one for both the organisation and the student.

The learning which students acquired through their placement was documented in their e-learning diaries, together with their reflections on the work place and its activities more generally, as required for assessment purposes. From this substantial body of information they are now expected to add to their e-portfolio the key learning outcomes acquired during this time. This enables them, particularly those students with little or no relevant work experience, to bring some substance and depth to their portfolios, adding highly relevant skills and knowledge to what, for school-leavers in particular, may be a relatively limited portfolio. Building and developing the e-portfolio in this way provides students with more confidence when seeking employment and provides employers with more information as to the range of the applicants’ knowledge and experience – it is a win-win situation for both parties.

## Conclusion

This research confirmed what has generally been reported elsewhere – that placements provide a highly relevant educational experience that is appreciated by students and that generally lives up to their expectations. In addition, it provides those who are new to the industry with the opportunity to gain invaluable skills and knowledge which can then be integrated into their e-portfolios which increasingly are becoming seen as a major key in unlocking the job market.

The fact that there are few substantial differences between the two student cohorts suggests that the findings from this research are an accurate picture of the situation for LIS students more generally. The positive view of the placement and the belief in its role in LIS education is further strengthened by this study. The authors intend to build on this data and it is anticipated that the survey will continue to be administered to both groups on a yearly basis in order to assess the continuing appropriateness and success of placements and to encourage further feedback to continually inform the placement process. Following surveys will also address directly how students incorporate their practicum learning into their e-portfolios.

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# Appendix

Responses received from the first questionnaire, completed before students embarked on their placement (Tables AI-AV).

The last question on the “before” survey asked for students to respond with a free text answer to the question “Which subject or learning area do you think will be most useful for your placement – and why?” A total of 21 Australian and 38 Slovenian responses were received.

Once students had finished their placements they were then encouraged to complete the second survey recording their feelings of the placement (Tables AVI-AXI).

**Table AI.**  
When did you first hear about having to do the professional placement?

	Australia (% respondents)	Slovenia (% respondents)
Before enrolment in the course	24	38
When I first enrolled	28	23
At Residential School	44	6
Later in the course	4	27
When I started studying	0	6

**Table AII.**  
Relevant work experience

	Australia (% respondents)	Slovenia (% respondents)
None	13	64
< 1 year	4	29
1-3 years	21	7
More than 3 years	62	0

**Table AIII.**  
Answered by those *with* relevant work experience on how they felt about doing the placement (20 Slovenian, 22 Australian responded)

	Australia (% respondents)	Slovenia (% respondents)
Very positive – it will expand my knowledge	68	60
Quite positive – I am expecting it to be useful to a degree	22	30
Unsure	5	10
Quite negative – I am afraid it will be a bit of a waste of time	5	0
Very negative – I do not expect to get anything out of it	0	0

**Table AIV.**  
The importance of the placement in a student’s studies

	Australia (% respondents)	Slovenia (% respondents)
Strongly agree it is a very important part	46	59
Agree	37	37
Unsure	17	4
Disagree	0	0
Strongly disagree	0	0

**Table AV.**

What do you expect to get  
from your placement?

	Australia (% respondents)*	Slovenia (% respondents)*
Put into action in the workplace the skills and knowledge I have gained through study	72	66
Gain new skills and knowledge	80	84
Help me gain a better understanding of working in the area	64	77
Help me decide about my future employment options	72	45
An opportunity to network	76	21
Nothing much	0	2
Did not want to do it	4	0

**Note:** \*Students were told they could tick multiple boxes

**Table AVI.**

Where were placements  
undertaken?

	Australia (% respondents)	Slovenia (% respondents)
Academic library	40	23
Public library	36	34
Special library	16	11
Publisher	0	9
Bookshop	0	20
Other	8	3

**Table AVII.**

How worthwhile was the  
placement in terms of  
providing you with  
additional skills?

	Australia (% respondents)	Slovenia (% respondents)
Very worthwhile	72	49
Worthwhile	20	34
Not sure	4	14
Not worthwhile	4	3
A waste of my time	0	0

**Table AVIII.**

Overall evaluation of the  
placement

	Australia (% respondents)	Slovenia (% respondents)
Exceeded expectations a lot	52	23
Was a little better than expected	28	31
What you had expected	12	26
Did not meet expectations	8	20
Was well below expectations	0	0

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**Table AIX.**

Feedback received from the principal workplace tutor or supervisor

	Australia (% respondents)	Slovenia (% respondents)
Regular positive feedback	76	72
Occasional positive feedback	16	20
Little or no feedback	8	3
Some negative feedback	0	5
A lot of negative feedback	0	0

**Table AX.**

Length of time for placement. The question was "Three weeks for the placement is . . ."

	Australia (% respondents)	Slovenia (% respondents)
Too much	4	8
About right	88	46
Too little	8	46

**Table AXI.**

Assessment associated with the subject

	Australia (% respondents)	Slovenia (% respondents)
Far too much	0	3
A bit too much	8	8
About right	92	80
A bit easier	0	6
A lot easier	0	3

### About the authors

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