review of **research**

work placements in **vocational education** and **training courses**

E Smith
R Harris

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work placements in
vocational education
and **training courses:**
evidence from the
cross-sectoral literature

Erica Smith
Roger Harris

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executive summary

This report is a review of the literature, available research and current Australian practice relating to work placements. Its purpose is to draw together findings on work placements from three educational sectors in order to inform policy and practice in the vocational education and training (VET) sector.

Many educational institutions provide work placements as part of the curriculum whereby students attend workplaces for a period of supervised participation in work activities. These placements generally have different names in the different sectors. In schools, they may be known as work experience or work placements and in universities as practicums, fieldwork or industry placements. In the VET sector there is a variety of such names which appear to depend on course level and placement purpose. There appears to be little dialogue between sectors, with the development of literature and theory occurring in a parallel rather than in an integrated manner in the three educational sectors.

This study has found that much of the literature and practice on work placements is predicated on a number of assumptions, and yet there is not always agreement on these matters. There are two key areas of contestation. One is the nature of the workplace, the second is the nature of the learning. Emerging from these two contestable areas is the critical issue of roles—particularly of the learner, but also of the provider and workplace 'mentors'. While pockets of the literature address one or other of these aspects, there is little agreement and many gaps are left untouched. This state of affairs furnishes both the urgent need and the window of opportunity for a great deal of empirical and, particularly, ethnographic research in the area. Moreover, the issue of the purpose of placements has not yet been resolved—is the purpose to learn *about* the workplace or *in* the workplace?

The lack of a coherent cross-sectoral literature means that the wheel is reinvented many times which may account for the number of 'how-to' manuals within each of the sectors. While this to some extent represents wasted effort, there is nevertheless a need to pay attention to this diversity between and within sectors.

Lessons cannot simply be transplanted unaltered to VET from schools and universities, as there are considerable variations in history, nature of students and so on. Also, within the VET sector there are considerable differences among industries and among VET students.

The greatest volume of literature relates to the university sector, while there is some in the school sector and relatively little in the VET sector. The authors conclude that, while the literature is relatively extensive, it tends to be sector-specific, discipline-related, mostly uncritical, focussed on administrative practicalities to the relative neglect of the more significant issues such as learning, cultural tensions, and roles and identities. The literature is also somewhat confused by the juxtapositioning of work placements—structured skill-based experiences related to particular subjects or modules—with more generic work experience and a tendency (particularly in VET sector literature) to confusion between work placements and general workplace training, and by different nomenclatures across the sectors. Moreover, the literature tends to be predominantly based on perceptual rather than empirical evidence and framed primarily from the perspective of the education provider.

The review has uncovered many gaps which indicate the need for further research in the VET sector. The first and perhaps major gap is the lack of any scoping study such as has been carried out in the school sector. We do not know how many VET courses include placements, in what fields of study or for what types of students. There is also a need for research into the experiences as well as roles and identities of those involved in placements, the effects of workplace power relationships, and the attitudes of other workers and unions. From a learning perspective we know little about the nature and extent of learning undertaken while on placements, the relative strengths of alternative models and approaches to placements as part of the curriculum, access and equity issues, and management of and assessment during placements.

The review has also highlighted many critical challenges in work placements, such as resourcing, professional development, tensions between workplace and provider cultures, variations in quality of workplace learning environments and equity in access. The issue of quality in particular has been underlined; work placements are very dependent on the calibre and orientation of the workplace mentor(s) and on the breadth and depth of experience possible in any particular workplace.

The following needs for the VET sector have been identified by this study.

For *practitioners*, a need for:

✦ careful consideration in recruiting and keeping host employers

✦ close monitoring of workplaces for quality in the learning environments which they provide for placement students

✦ a need for clarification of mutual expectations and responsibilities

✦ attention to the preparation of students before, support during, and debriefing after undertaking work placements

✦ recognition of the student as the 'meat in the sandwich'

✦ maintaining a constant dialogue with host employers

✦ access to information and literature about good practice in work placement policies, arrangements and practices

✦ access to professional development about the work placement process

In *policy terms*, a need for:

✦ gathering and dissemination of information about work placement policies, arrangements and practices

✦ a recognition of the problems inherent in work placements to enable their being adequately addressed

✦ official encouragement (and perhaps including incentives) for employers to participate, given that benefits for them beyond their philanthropic contribution to the 'social good' are often not evident

✦ greater, and critical, attention to what happens to students on placements and what they learn

✦ partnership and dialogue with providers of VET teacher training to ensure inclusion of placement issues in the curriculum for VET teachers

✦ provision of professional development for work placement co-ordinators

✦ adequate resourcing of work placements, particularly time to carefully prepare and debrief students, and for providers to visit and support students during placement, activities not always funded within current formulae

✦ funding of further research in the 'gap areas' identified in this review

For *providers*, a need for:

✦ professional development for (both provider and workplace) co-ordinators involved in work placement arrangements

- a more co-ordinated approach to placements as an important and cross-discipline part of the curriculum

- clarification for all parties of the purpose of each placement and an evaluation of placements against those purposes

- adequate resourcing of placements rather than viewing them as a cheap alternative to on-campus delivery

The study has highlighted a wide range of *possibilities for future research* into work placements in the VET sector. These include:

- a mapping exercise of VET sector work placements

- experiences of students and workplace mentors during placements—what is it like to be a student on placement, and what is it like being a workplace mentor for placement students?

- power relationships in the workplace and their effects on student learning during work placements

- roles and identities in what is labelled in the literature as the 'tripod' arrangement (Le-Clercq 1992)—the student, the provider mentor and the workplace mentor

- examination of union attitudes and attitudes of other workers towards work placements and 'placed' students

- in-depth analysis of the actual learning undertaken by students

- the skills employed by VET practitioners who arrange and monitor placements

- relative strengths of alternative models and approaches, such that empirical research can begin to inform the development of robust theoretical models that can be used cross-sectorally

- access and equity issues, such as the availability of placements in particular locations and industries, and for particular types of students

- the processes involved in managing placements and maintaining host employers

- assessment during placements, and the issue of recognition of prior learning (RPL)

- the impact of training packages upon the number and nature of placements in VET courses

- a follow-up study of students who have completed placements

The curious paradox in the VET sector is that, while work placements may be under serious threat because of shrinking resources and constricting quality placement possibilities, the pressure for them is likely to increase as a result of the demand for 'real-world' learning and 'authentic' assessment, and such recent VET policy initiatives as training packages and the growth of VET in schools.

The literature and available research reveal that, while there are many challenges and possible points of failure, work placements hold tremendous potential. However, this potential can only be realised where the aims of placements are made clear, environments are conducive to learning, all participants are adequately equipped and resourced, and policies and information are clear and encouraging.

context

The purpose of this review is to draw together literature on work placements from all educational sectors in order to inform policy and practice in the VET sector. Although the VET sector has traditionally had closer ties with workplaces than either schools or universities, the literature on work placements in the VET sector is curiously thin. Although many of the important issues are well-known amongst VET practitioners responsible for arranging and monitoring placements, they have rarely been empirically researched, or communicated to a wider audience. Hence practice in the VET sector can be informed by the larger bodies of literature in the school and university sectors. With the advent of training packages, many of which require delivery and assessment in workplaces, the demand for work placements from the VET sector is likely to increase. This study is therefore extremely timely.

In order to augment the small amount of literature available about the VET sector, two additional methods of research were employed. Firstly, attempts were made to consult those responsible for policy and curriculum development relating to placements in the States and Territories. This process proved exceedingly difficult, successful contact being made in only a few cases with people with experience and expertise in, or responsibility for work placements, despite numerous phone calls to people at a variety of levels within the system, in research and curriculum areas and even at individual TAFE institutes. This suggests one or both of two possibilities: that the decentralisation of TAFE systems and the associated demise of central research/policy units means that research into such matters will be increasingly difficult to carry out; and/or that TAFE systems have not yet come to terms with work placements as an issue requiring a co-ordinated approach. More usefully, a focus group was convened with nine teachers at Douglas Mawson Institute of TAFE, South Australia, in March 2000. The teachers, all

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responsible for work placements, were from a range of fields of study and the session proved highly productive, with many themes and issues canvassed and discussed.

This review is divided into three parts:

- ✦ critical review of literature and current Australian practice in the educational sectors (schools, universities and VET)
- ✦ major issues in work placements arising from the literature and consultations
- ✦ findings and directions for future research

critical review of literature and current Australian practice in the educational sectors

Many educational institutions provide work placements as part of the curriculum for their students. Students attend workplaces for a period of supervised participation in work activities, this participation generally having some connection with the curriculum of the educational institution. These placements generally have different names in the different sectors. In schools, for example, they may be known as work experience or work placements. In universities, they may be known as periods of practicum, fieldwork or industry placement. In the VET sector, there are a variety of names, using both school and university terminology, which appears to depend partly on course level and partly on placement purpose. There appears to be little dialogue between the three educational sectors, with the development of literature and theory occurring in a parallel rather than integrated manner in the three sectors.

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The first section of this report examines bodies of recent literature in each of the three sectors, with some reference to current practice especially where the literature is limited, which is the case particularly in the VET sector.

the **school** sector

VET courses are becoming more common in the post-compulsory years of schooling (Years 11 and 12), and most of these courses involve some interaction with workplaces. Surveys carried out for the Australian Student Traineeship Foundation in 1995 and 1996 (Ainley & Fleming 1995, 1997) showed that, in 1995, 46 per cent of

schools offered what were then called 'school–industry programs', increasing rapidly to 62 per cent by 1996. There were significant variations between States and Territories and between different types of school. A further survey carried out in 1999 is shortly to be published. According to another source, by 2000, 90 per cent of schools offering senior secondary curriculum had VET in Schools programs, involving 136 710 students (MCEETYA 2000). In addition, by 1998, 1900 school students were undertaking part-time apprenticeships and traineeships (NCVER 1998); this number doubled to almost 4000 in 1999 (MCEETYA 2000)[1]. Moreover, school-based students may attend VET providers through programs such as that in NSW formerly known as Joint Secondary School TAFE[2] (JSST). In 1998 it was estimated that one in ten 15–19-year-old students were involved in JSST-type programs (NCVER 1998). Clearly, VET for school students is an area of rapid growth and diversity, to the extent that it has been suggested there is confusion among employers as well as students about the area (Tattam 1998; MCEETYA 2000).

There are wide variations in the way in which VET in Schools programs are conceptualised and implemented, but generally work placements are included. However, not all VET courses in schools offer work placements. Courses may involve other forms of connection with industry and the world of work, such as projects, industry visits and guest speakers, the development of school enterprises, and so on (Evans & Poole 1992).

Around 60 per cent of the school–industry programs identified in the 1996 Ainley and Fleming survey included at least some time in work placement for participating students; however, only 24 per cent of programs involved more than 20 days in the workplace. By 2000 around 58 000 school students were estimated to be undertaking structured work placements (MCEETYA 2000). In addition to these structured programs, however, there are also the traditional 'work experience programs' undertaken by nearly every Australian child usually during Years 10 and 11 of school. While there has in the past been debate about the purpose of work placements for school children—for instance, are they for students to learn *about* the workplace or to learn *in* the workplace (Sweet 1995, p.16; Smith 1994, p.150)—there is now a fairly clear distinction between skills-based placements and the traditional work experience programs. One of the earliest and best-known examples of skills-based placements was Training for Retail and Commerce (TRAC) (for example, Smith 1994). The principles involved in TRAC have now been incorporated in most VET in Schools programs. The Ministerial Council on Employment, Education and Training (MCEETYA) definition of structured work placement programs now requires that they be based on competency standards

and relate to the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) qualifications (Miles Morgan Australia 1998, p.5). Training packages are increasingly forming the basis for VET in Schools programs and thus for the skills to be developed in placements (Main 2000). Structured workplace learning is generally regarded as being more effective than work experience (Cumming & Carbines 1997), but obviously presents more challenges; for example, skills must be formally assessed.

Much of the literature consists of 'mapping exercises' designed to capture the extent and diversity of programs involving work placements. Nevertheless, the picture remains far from clear (MCEETYA 2000). There are great variations in the structure and length of placements across the States and Territories (Dusseldorp Skills Forum 1997; Teese, Davies & Ryan 1997). Moreover, confusion is caused by different terms such as 'vocational education', 'VET in Schools', 'work placement',' school–industry programs' and so on. Furthermore, statistical information, has to be examined carefully to ensure like is compared with like. Much of the literature refers to VET in Schools programs in general and sometimes separate data are not available for work placements as a component of these programs. For example, a recent Australian study by Velde and Cooper (2000), although purportedly reporting on students' views of 'workplace learning', in fact reports on their views of their vocational programs as a whole, not just their work placements. A comparatively small number of studies have surveyed students about their experiences in workplaces; for example, Misko (1998a), covering both work experience and placements, and Teese, Davies and Ryan (1997), covering work placements only. A current research project (Smith, Green, Brennan & Keirl, in progress) is surveying school students to examine their learning experiences in work experience, work placements and part-time jobs. Another current project is investigating current practice in school/small business enterprise links, and in the process identifying issues for students as well as for program co-ordinators in both environments (Wyatt et al. in progress).

Some of the remaining school-sector literature consists of 'success stories' associated with particular programs such as TRAC (for example, Smith 1994; Scharashkin 1994), reporting on benefits to students and employers alike. There are also, however, a number of concerns connected with the role of the workplace, but these are less represented, particularly in the Australian literature. There has been relatively little scrutiny of the employer's part in work placements. Overseas research suggests that employers are under no obligation to participate in work placements; it is expensive and time-consuming for them to take part in the arrangement of work placements and in supervision and assessment of students (Watts 1991a, p.140).

Schools may feel with some justification that extra obligations associated with work placements may result in employers withdrawing their co-operation. However, there is some evidence to show that employers may actually react favourably to increased obligations associated with more structured work placements (Smith 1994; Sweet 1995, p.16; Smith & Smith 1996), although an increased role in assessment may be problematic (Miles Morgan Australia 1998, p.24).

There are also concerns that the availability of work placements could become a growing problem (Misko 1998b). Certain industries such as hospitality are over-represented in work placements compared with industries in which employment may eventually be available. Miles Morgan Australia (1998, p.17) suggests that the familiarity of industries like hospitality with supervision of casual staff increases the propensity to offer placements. Shilling (1989) has pointed out the fragility of placement arrangements, the danger that a single unsatisfactory student may lose a long-established placement, and the destructive dynamic by which falling numbers of employers places untenable pressure upon the remaining pool. In some instances, a co-ordinating body in a geographical area has streamlined approaches to employers and proved satisfactory, as in Tamworth, NSW (*Training Agenda* 2000, p.42) and many other localities.

A major study carried out for the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (Miles Morgan Australia 1998) examined the potential for increasing placement opportunities, identifying a number of problem areas, including cultural differences between school and workplace environments, proper preparation of students for workplaces and good communication and co-ordination mechanisms. The report also identified a considerable amount of goodwill and success. It is generally accepted that employers participate in work placements from a sense of social responsibility (Helms & Nelson 1997; Misko 1998b; Bailey Hughes & Barr 1998; Figgis 1998a) although they can also gain the benefit of an 'extra pair of hands' (Smith 1994; Figgis 1998a). Generally, host employers are likely to have better human resource and training programs overall than are employers who do not take work placement students (Smith & Smith 1996; Bailey, Hughes & Barr 1998). Employers may also see work placements as an opportunity to view potential employees (Smith 1994; Figgis 1998a), and an opportunity for their staff to learn supervisory and training skills (Figgis 1998a).

Some concerns in the literature relate to the experiences of students. Students are potentially at risk from employers who may exploit them or behave inappropriately (Shilling 1989). Unpleasant work placements may have detrimental

impacts on students, who are removed from their normal support systems but are not in the workplace long enough to develop new systems (Shilling 1989, p.164). There is some evidence that there is little shared, coherent understanding between schools and enterprises (especially small ones) as to what constitutes structured workplace learning, and that students in particular often do not understand the difference between work experience and structured workplace learning (Wyatt et al., in progress). Little research has been carried out into the actual learning undergone by students. An American study found that students undertook mainly routine tasks but that learning varied widely between work sites (Stasz & Kaganoff 1997). Students are generally understood to learn work habits (Stasz & Kaganoff 1997), but not all commentators agree that work habits such as conformity and acceptance of poor working conditions are necessarily a good thing. White (1989, pp.9–10), for example, questions the 'behavioural' skills supposed to be developed, suggesting that submissiveness and related 'social-psychological characteristics' have been redefined as 'essential components of industrial or vocational skill.' Finally, students in the past, especially in schools, experienced a number of timetabling problems when undergoing work placements as well as difficulty in having their learning accredited for university entrance purposes (Sweet 1997), although such problems are becoming fewer as vocational education in schools becomes more mainstream.

A wide variety of 'how-to' literature has been published relating to work placements in the school sector. This ranges from generic 'advice' to locally produced materials for particular programs. An example of the former is a complete edition of the British journal, *Education + Training*, devoted to practical matters relating to work experience (Hopkins 1990) which includes a summary of the national British picture at that time and examples of organisational arrangements provided by some local education authorities. Australian examples are a NSW leaflet produced in 1993 (Lepani & Currie 1993), a workplace supervisor's handbook produced by the Centre for Workplace Learning (Centre for Workplace Learning 1995) and, most recently, a book aimed at practitioners and published by NCVER in the series, *Getting to grips with …* (Misko 2000). The latter includes guidelines on administrative arrangements, discussion of monitoring and evaluating placements and an annotated bibliography, and incorporates many sample proformas. It concludes with a helpful model for implementing work experience and vocational placement programs. The Australian Student Traineeship Foundation provides a number of publications for schools administering work placements including 'quick tips' leaflets on specific topics such as inducting workplace supervisors and winning parents' support. These are available on-line at http://www.astf.com.au/web/astfform.nsf

the **university** sector

Work placements in the university sector have a long history, in many of the vocations such as law, medicine and teaching going back at least a century. For some of the other disciplines, work placements are relatively recent, but have expanded to the extent that they are increasingly becoming 'part of the mainstream rather than a marginal aspect of higher education' (Schaafsma 1996, p.5). The emergence of 'a discourse of competence' (Cleminson & Bradford 1996, p.249) has now put pressure on professional education courses to incorporate periods in the workplace. However, there is some hint in the literature that, despite the proclaimed significance of work placements, tight economic times are forcing changes such as shrinking placement duration and reduced learner support. The literature strongly contends that the latter, in particular, is a crucial factor in the effectiveness of work placements.

There are various models of work placements in this sector. Martin (1996) offers the clearest analysis of these. She provides an excellent summary of the development of what she generically labels 'this model of protected and guided practice' (Martin 1996, pp.3–6), linking shifts in emphasis in this model with wider societal and educational changes. For example, in the early models, the assumption was that theory once learned could easily be applied to practice. Professional bodies however, began to indicate that theory learned in the classroom was not readily being translated to the field. Another concern was that such models were lengthy and therefore expensive. Other models therefore came to be used, and a summary of the major models is as follows (Martin 1996; CREEW 1997):

 ✦ *Sandwich* programs: these programs embrace a range of work-based education models, the most common of which involves a year of professional work experience 'sandwiched' between the second and fourth year of a university course (for example, engineering).

 ✦ *Co-operative* programs: the work experience segment, instead of being a separate additional year, is integrated into the overall curriculum. This is currently by far the most common form of work-based learning in Australian and British universities. These programs are avenues enabling staff to develop entrepreneurial links with industry, and are designed to assist students' entry into the workplace.

 ✦ *Co-operative education for enterprise development* (CEED) programs: these are a type of co-operative program where the objectives extend beyond the development of professional experience of students and promote enterprise development through a university–industry

partnership in training, innovation and development. These programs are structured and managed so that students are not regarded as cheap labour but as contributors to an organisation's operations. They operate on the basis of firmly constructed contracts where the benefits for all parties are made explicit.

✦ *Joint industry–university courses*: these are, in many cases, jointly conducted and funded with a major company. They aim for a seamless unity between university and workplace expertise (an example is the Ford Studies program implemented by Deakin University).

✦ *Clinical placement models or practicums*: the aim is to give students the experience of the basic requirements of their future work and to build their confidence and understanding. Medicine, veterinary science, nursing and teaching are fields of study where students spend extended periods in actual settings before graduation.

✦ *Fieldwork*: in fieldwork, there is generally an expectation that students will be involved in working for and supporting the agency (for example, social work professions). The extent and level of work is negotiated between student, university and agency and is largely dependent on the needs of the agency at the time of fieldwork. The time spent in agencies is often less than in other models.

The literature in the university sector tends to be discipline-specific. Social work (Moore 1995; Knight 1996; Reid, Bailey-Dempsey &Viggiani 1996), library studies (Dow 1996; Sanders 1996; Chivers & Flatten 1996), nursing (May & Veitch 1998), business studies (Eakins 1997; Morgan, 1997), hospitality (Waryszak 1999), social welfare (Beveridge 1994) and retail (Huntington, Stephen & Oldfield 1999) are just some of the many disciplines which have their own work placement literature. A great amount of the literature refers to teaching placements (for example, Zeichner 1990; Ben-Peretz & Rumney 1991; Danaher 1994; Sultana 1996). Teacher education has a longer history of field experience than many disciplines (Ryan, Toohey & Hughes 1994, p.5), and may therefore have had more opportunities to research it. There are relatively few studies that examine work placements as a generic concept. To a certain extent, this is not surprising as such arrangements are, ipso facto, firmly embedded in their context. As Martin (1996, p.viii) claims, 'different professions demand different, as well as some similar, qualities and the best placements attend closely to the development of qualities and attributes appropriate for the given profession'.

Three useful general reviews of the literature on work placements in tertiary education have been undertaken—one in Australia and two in the UK. The Australian review was undertaken by Ryan, Toohey and Hughes (1994). It focussed

on five key areas: purpose; value; relationship between the practicum and the learning outcomes of a course; structure and placement of the practicum within training courses; and assessment. Ashworth and Saxton (1992) synthesised much of the literature in their UK work, which focussed upon 'sandwich' courses. They identified two key questions:

- ✦ how can the placement be managed so that it is a genuine educational experience?
- ✦ what are the main roles of the tutor and the workplace supervisor?

A recent review of the literature in the UK has been undertaken by Foster and Stephenson (1998). This review traces the development of different types of placements and other work-based learning initiatives, relating them to developments in UK government education policy during the 1990s.

The majority, though not all, of the literature in this sector tends to be positive and uncritical. The benefits of work placements are taken for granted. These include, for students, the opportunity to learn from experience (Cleminson & Bradford 1996), experiencing the 'real world' (Schaafsma 1996), improving self-efficacy (Waryszak 1999), and the chance for finding employment (Dow 1996) or at least increasing employability (Poustie 1996). Employers have the chance to examine possible employees (Tilley 1997).

Most reviews of particular programs therefore report success. But this begs the question: successful at what? The evidence is usually perceptual, various participants offering their opinions on what they believe is happening (Cutt & Loken 1993, p.192). This is one factor that has resulted in only very small advances in knowledge about work placements. Ashworth and Saxton (1992), Ricks et al. (1993) and Schaafsma (1996) all note that there has been little systematic and critical research into placements, particularly in relation to the relative strengths of alternative models, and the actual learning experienced by students. Such claims, in literature from a range of countries, may have provoked action: since the mid-1990s, there appears to have been an increase in publications, although the fundamental criticisms remain essentially intact. In Australia, a special edition of the journal *Higher Education Research & Development* was devoted to work-based learning in 1998 (vol. 17, no. 2, June 1998).

Some recent literature has examined particular problems associated with work placements as part of university courses. Schaafsma (1996) has identified gaps between the rhetoric associated with placements and the actual experiences of students. Ashworth and Saxton (1992) and Cameron and Hayden (1995) discuss the

ambiguous situation of students—neither employees nor simply visitors, their loyalties are divided. Students can become 'captured' by inappropriate workplace cultures (Ben-Peretz & Rumney 1991; Cleminson & Bradford 1996) or exposed to very limited ranges of experience (Cleminson & Bradford 1996). In general, there is little attention paid to ensuring that appropriate learning takes place (Martin 1996; Tilley 1997), nor to effective communication between university and employer. Martin (1998) notes that academic staff involved in supervising students on placements may have quite different views about what placements are for, and that differences in views affect student learning. Assessment is also an issue, with an argument put forward by Benett (1989) that assessment of performance is not appropriate for what is essentially a broad experience for the student.

A segment of the literature provides help and advice for stakeholders in placements. Schaafsma (1996, pp.8–9) develops a set of generic elements for learners, academic staff and industry supervisors. These are embedded within a 'spiral model of work placement', linking classroom and workplace and emphasising reflection as an essential component of the process. This model, with its three phases of placement preparation, placement experience and placement review, and accompanying form templates, is explained in detail in a clearly written and very helpful manual, *Making your work placement effective* (Gowing, McGregor & Taylor 1997). While primarily compiled for use by the learner, it also incorporates a brief guide for the host organisation. Another guide is by McBurney-Fry (1998), written for students in teacher education programs and providing a comprehensive coverage of the philosophical issues as well as the daily events encountered by students and their co-operating teachers.

the VET sector

In the VET sector there have always been close links between workplaces and TAFE and other vocational organisations. The links are exemplified by apprenticeships and traineeships, in which employees in an industry spend, typically, one day a week attending a TAFE institute. Under user choice policy, other providers apart from TAFE are involved in such programs, and various forms of flexible delivery may also be involved (Smith & Keating 1997). Many other TAFE students are also in full-time employment, attending TAFE part-time for further qualifications in their current industry or gaining further skills in order to change careers. In addition, many full-time TAFE students also work part-time (Dwyer et al. 1999), typically in non-career jobs similar to those held by school students (Smith et al. in progress). Thus work

placements form only one of several modes in which TAFE students experience workplaces. However, the majority of TAFE students are not employed in jobs which relate to their area of study (Hager 1994) and so the only way in which such students will experience the industry for which they are studying is through work placements.

The multiplicity of employment and study mixes may help to account for the fact that the literature on TAFE work placements is relatively thin compared with those for the school and university sectors. Burvill (1993) explains that work experience in TAFE courses has traditionally taken two forms. In some discipline areas (or 'fields of study' as they are more commonly labelled in VET), there are periods of 'fieldwork' or 'prac' which are typically in higher-level qualifications such as those at AQF level 5, in child or library studies. In addition, labour market programs and access courses have often contained periods of 'work experience' which are 'work tasters' rather than periods of skill acquisition. These may consist of one or two week blocks, or in the case of pre-apprenticeships, one day per week during the duration of the course. In the mid-1990s, only about 19 per cent of TAFE courses and 39 per cent of accredited courses delivered by non-TAFE providers had a formal on-the-job component as a necessary part of the course (Smith et al. 1996). There were variations among the fields of study in relation to the amount of on-the-job component (Smith et al. 1996, p.26). A study carried out in the USA (Bragg, Hamm & Trinkle 1994) found similar patchy occurrence of work placements (which they called 'work-based learning') in two-year colleges (which include community, junior and technical colleges), with certain fields of study such as nursing and business more likely to include placements than others.

However, the patchy coverage of work placements has been changing during the 1990s, with greater proportions of some courses being delivered in the workplace through various types of partnerships between employers and TAFE institutes (Symmonds et al. 1999). In NSW TAFE, two generic work 'placement' (or perhaps more correctly, 'work experience') modules have been developed to replace a plethora of course-specific modules that previously existed. The situation is set to change again with the recent advent of training packages, which require workplace delivery of some units of competence as a matter of course (Souter 2000). TAFE systems are currently grappling with the implications of these shifts in delivery. Inevitably in the newly marketised VET system, some attention has focussed on the relative costs of work placements as opposed to the costs of delivery in an institute (Symmonds et al. 1999; Caven 2000; Curriculum Resourcing and Operations Unit 2000). Funding was also identified as a major issue in the American study referred to

above (Bragg, Hamm & Trinkle 1994) which argued that employers or other groups should take on some of the responsibilities involved, as colleges are unable properly to resource placements.

As well as there being very little literature on the topic, the VET work placement literature is also relatively unfruitful because it tends to exhibit some confusion between work placements and general issues relating to workplace training. Much of the already scant literature fails to focus precisely upon work placement issues because general workplace training and learning literature is discussed at length (for example, Hawke 1995; Robertson 1996). It would be reasonable to expect that there would be some similarities between the training provided by companies for employees and for work placement students, and indeed Smith and Smith (1996) have shown that 'good' training companies are perhaps more likely to accept placement students. However, it is dangerous to assume that exact parallels can be drawn. There is little reason to assume either that employers would treat students like ordinary employees, or that students would treat their host workplaces as they would a workplace in which they were employed and getting paid.

However, there have been a small number of detailed empirical and theoretical studies, some from overseas and some Australian, which focus upon work placements. The American study referred to above identifies a number of factors which the authors believe make for 'exemplary practice' in work placements. These are: strong program leadership; exclusive connections between the program and its environment; good communication with local employers; beliefs about program excellence; effective college-based learning components; adequate and diverse financial support and innovative pedagogical features (Bragg & Hamm 1995). Mulcahy (1999) examined work experience in catering courses in Irish colleges of further education. While believing that planned and systematic work experience can be a major factor in building a skilled hospitality workforce, Mulcahy points out a number of problems, such as divergent views among the stakeholders (employers, students, college teachers), issues of exploitation of students, and lack of legal recognition of the status of work experience students.

Van der Wagen (1995), in an in-depth look at a pilot scheme under the now superseded Australian Vocational Training System, examined work placements in an accommodation services TAFE course. A study in Victoria of work placements in the community services industry (Community Services & Health Industry Training Board 1996) surveyed VET providers and employers involved in placements. The latter study found that demand for placements peaks at certain times of the year, that both

providers and host employers find resourcing placements a problem, and that placements are more problematic in rural and regional than metropolitan areas. A study by NSW TAFE, covering several fields of study, confirmed that work placements were likely to be more problematic in regional institutes, referring to employer 'work placement exhaustion' (Curriculum Resourcing and Operations Unit 1999). In NSW a work placement co-ordination project negotiates placements in some key areas such as hospitality in Sydney (Souter 2000). In some fields of study (such as child studies), TAFE institutes compete with schools and universities as well as each other for placements.

Theoretical and empirical studies on assessment in workplaces also provide some insight into work placement issues. Hager (1994) discusses the relative merits of on-the-job and off-the-job assessment in VET courses, implicitly discussing learning as well as assessment. He stresses that the majority of TAFE students (60 per cent) are not in employment related to their TAFE courses and that an increased move to off-the-job delivery and assessment needs to take account of this fact. More recently, Booth (1999) identifies some assessment issues in workplaces which are becoming more important with the advent of training packages. It is expected that training packages, together with user choice in traineeships and apprenticeships, will involve a shift to delivery and assessment in workplaces (Courtenay, Mawer & Connole 1997). This could create inequities for those who find it difficult to obtain paid work or work placements.

Finally, as in the other sectors, there is a small amount of 'how to' literature aimed at those responsible for organising and participating in work placements. These include a publication for those involved in pre-apprenticeships in NSW TAFE (Basic Work Skills Training Division 1992) and a more recent general booklet concerning work placements, or 'work-based learning programs' as they were described (Educational Development Division 1995). Generally these booklets are produced by TAFE systems and not publicly available. Booklets are produced for TAFE teachers who have a co-ordination role, for employers hosting placements, and for students undertaking work placements. Examples of the latter are work experience record books for pre-apprentices (TAFE NSW 1992) and for work placement students in general (Canberra Institute of Technology [CIT] 1995[3]). An example of a booklet with multiple audiences is one produced by South Australian TAFE for TAFE staff, students and host employers (Legislation and Delegations Unit 1996). Such booklets typically focus on administrative and legal arrangements, and on responsibilities of the parties, with learning and assessment issues forming only a minor focus.

major issues in work placements

This section of the report draws together the major issues identified in the literature and consultations. While issues arising in all sectors will be examined, and references and examples will be drawn from all three sectors, the major purpose of this section is to identify the issues relevant to the VET sector. In general, the practical issues are best covered in the literature relating to the school sector and in the small amount of VET sector literature. These issues were also identified in the TAFE teacher focus group and the consultations. The university sector literature tends to be more reflective and analytical, identifying underlying tensions and contradictions, and thus has a considerable amount to add to the literature available on the school and VET sector. While the similarity in the issues identified across the sectors is noticeable, the degree of emphasis alters from sector to sector.

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lack of common name and of common body of literature

Since the bodies of literature in the three sectors have evolved separately, little synergy exists between each and a great deal of 'reinventing of the wheel' is apparent. This has been particularly evident in the school work placement literature. Work placements in school (as opposed to work experience) are comparatively new and the lessons learnt from the university literature, in particular, do not appear to have transferred to the school literature. The latter tends to be enthusiastic, almost evangelical in tone, with little recognition of the deeper (as opposed to administrative) problems inherent in embracing workplaces as sites of learning for school students. The VET literature acknowledges practical difficulties but often does not extend beyond this. A major barrier to cross-fertilisation is the different

terminology used by the different sectors. Terms such as 'practicum' or 'field work' from the university sector may have little meaning for school or VET teachers.

Diversity, however, is an asset as well as a drawback. As Martin (1996) notes, in relation to university placements, different professions demand different types of work placements. This helps to explain why, within the university sector, different literatures have grown up in different disciplines. While this also is a problem, in that cross-fertilisation between different disciplines rarely occurs, it is important to acknowledge the traditions existing in different professions and industries. This lesson needs to be transferred to the VET sector. While some industries have a strong tradition of training, such as those which have traditionally employed apprentices, this does not mean that firms from these industries are able or willing to host placement students successfully. Indeed, as Mulcahy (1999) suggests, placement students may be most successful in industries which have a strong tradition of employing casual labour (not traditionally the apprenticed industries) since they are used to settling in new staff quickly. Placement co-ordinators in courses which prepare students for occupations which are cross-industry (for example, office administration or information technology) may need to be particularly sensitive to such differences when placing students.

purposes of work placements

Watts (1991b) lists a number of aims of work placements: enhancing, motivational, maturational, investigative, expansive, sampling, preparatory, anticipatory, placing and custodial. He argues that not all of these are made explicit. Work placements are most generally presented as a chance to practise and hone skills which have been learned in related courses (Thomson 1996, p.4), to learn new skills which may not be covered in these courses, and to understand the real-world application of skills. They are expected to teach students about accountability—that workplace actions have consequences—and about the world of work in general. They are generally expected to make students more employable, both in general terms, and also potentially with their host employer. Work placements at different points in a course will have different purposes. Early in a course they may be designed to familiarise students with an industry, while later in the course they may be much more targetted towards finding employment. Much literature on work placements discusses these issues in detail, often quoting the various stakeholders to explain how such objectives have been achieved. Some of the literature has also pointed out that students may use work placements to try out an industry or an employer and discard it from their future career plans.

A critical approach is missing from most of the literature, with a few notable exceptions (for example, Petherbridge 1997). Just as there is a dearth of critical literature, a critical approach to work and workplaces does not seem to be encouraged in placements themselves. This may be because educational institutions and their students, in a perpetual state of gratitude to employers for offering placements, do not wish to appear to criticise them in any way. Critical examination of workplaces and workplace practices are more likely to be developed by 'enquiry-based programs' (Cole 1987) where students undertake activities such as research in workplaces as part of their assignments. However, it may be doing students a disservice not to make explicit workplace problems such as inequity, exploitation and so on. If they experience such difficulties themselves, without preparation, they may view them as a result of their own deficiencies to the complete exclusion of the structural inadequacies of the workplace.

benefits of work placements

The literature and the focus group suggest a number of benefits of work placements for all stakeholders. These are summarised below:

For *students*

+ learning new skills and applying existing ones
+ learning how to behave at work
+ experiencing a variety of workplaces
+ a chance to practise on more modern or different equipment
+ learning from other students' experiences
+ becoming empowered by success and wider knowledge
+ increase in skills and in finding a job

For *employers*

+ an extra pair of hands
+ staff development opportunity for supervisors and mentors
+ a chance to try out potential employees
+ philanthropic and advertising function
+ finding out about other available courses from the educational provider
+ an increase in the skills pool in local and national labour markets
+ better understanding of the national VET system

For *VET providers and teachers*

✦ learning about latest developments in workplaces

✦ networking

✦ chance to enrol employees or sell consultancy services

✦ potential for involving employers in other activities, for example, employer groups

✦ increased repertoire of workplace anecdotes for classroom teaching

✦ increased appreciation by students of classroom learning

While such lists suggest that work placements can be of benefit to all concerned, there are many challenges involved with placements and these are further discussed in the following sections.

learning

While work placements clearly have benefits for students, it is less clear what exactly they are expected to learn from them. Such expectations are rarely articulated, with educational institutions perhaps reluctant to open such a Pandora's box. To return to old arguments from the school-sector literature: are students expected to 'learn *about* the workplace or *in* the workplace'? (Sweet 1994, p.16). With the advent of competency-based training and particularly training packages, students' learning in workplaces (in VET and school programs alike) is meant to be clearly tied to competency standards, that is, to be skills-based. However, studies repeatedly mention learning workplace mores, learning about the 'real world' and so on (learning about the workplace) as being valuable outcomes of placements. There are clearly tensions between such desired and actual outcomes on the one hand, and assessment methods which are based purely on competency standards on the other hand. Benett (1989) has raised this issue in the university context. The Canberra Institute of Technology (1995) student workbook contains a number of learning activities about broader issues such as workplace culture and industrial matters, but it is difficult to see how students could be required to undertake such learning when they are being assessed solely on competency standards.

Research has shown that, in terms of learning, benefits of work placements include enabling students to experience the practical application of what they have learned in their courses (Benett 1989), experiencing the tensions of applying theoretical knowledge in real-life situations, and gaining an understanding of how practices may change over space and time (Cleminson & Bradford 1996). However,

should the placement be restricted in its learning opportunities, students may come to have a narrow or even biased view of practice. Misko's (1998a) recent survey of over 2000 school students found that the most frequently reported skills learned were: working with others, industry-specific skills, communication, and computer operation. Misko's (1998a) research is valuable in that students were not given a list of items to tick but were asked to state what they learned in their own words[4]. However, all such studies focus upon what students perceive themselves as learning at the time of the placement. There does not appear to have been any follow-up research with students who have undertaken placements to determine what aspects, if any, of their learning during placements were utilised in later full-time employment or elsewhere.

Students' learning depends greatly upon the calibre of the workers supervising or working with them. Students can easily learn bad as well as good practice. Hughes (1998, p.219) has noted that few accounts argue the possibility of facilitation occurring under hostile conditions, yet 'the workplace, while offering rich authenticity, is a far from ideal learning environment for employees and for students'. Ben-Peretz and Rumney (1991), in a study of trainee teachers, found that supervising teachers tended to pass on conformist and conservative practices. The shorter the placement, the less likely a student is to be able to make judgments about the standard of what he or she is being taught. Petherbridge (1997) in an English school sector study noted the different types of learning experienced by different students. She divided students into those whose learning was indifferent or restricted or exploratory. The 'exploratory' students 'brought independent judgment to bear upon their learning' (Petherbridge 1997, p.23). They looked outside their own 'job' to the organisation as a whole and were able to critique aspects of its operations.

integration into the curriculum

Curriculum development authors (for example, Sandery 1984; Smith & Keating 1997) have generally presented work placements as one option among many when planning a course of study. Decisions about whether to include work placements would normally be made on a number of bases including cost, availability of equipment and so on. However, the inclusion of mandatory work placements, especially as a result of the requirements of training packages, means that choice is often removed from the curriculum developer or teacher. Nevertheless, there remains a need for placements to be integrated into the total curriculum.

One obvious challenge is that the educational institution has little control over what happens to students in workplaces. While handbooks and preliminary discussions may specify what students should be doing and learning, such matters cannot be enforced. Moreover, students may be supervised by front-line managers, or even by non-supervisory staff, who were not involved in negotiations with the provider. Placement experiences of students may vary greatly from employer to employer, with some students having the opportunity to learn a wide range of skills and behaviours, while others are confined to mundane tasks or even (particularly in work experience programs) observation only. Assumptions cannot, therefore, be made about what has been learned. It would be dangerous therefore, to omit anything from the institutionally delivered part of the curriculum on the basis that it has been covered during the placement.

If an intention of work-related learning is to promote general educational development, then, as it has been argued, schools or colleges are more suited than placements to do this (Stern 1997), because more control is available over what is learned and more links can be made with the rest of the curriculum.

In the absence of control over curriculum in the workplace (Tilley 1997, p.50, describes it as a 'gamble'), the transfer of learning between provider and the workplace—always a problematic issue (Ryan 1997; Harris et al. 1995, p.145)—becomes difficult to assert because the workplace experiences of each student are so different. It is generally accepted, moreover, that learners need assistance to make links between practical workplace experience and related institutional learning. Research with apprentices and trainees (for example, Harris et al. 1998; Smith 2000) suggests that those VET students who are also employed in related industries experience a complex relationship between their workplace learning and their institutional learning. Over a period of time, they tend to experience variations in the way they favour one form of learning over the other, and often struggle to integrate the sometimes contradictory messages they receive from their 'two worlds'. There does not appear to have been any similar research with students who experience relatively short periods in the workplace on placements, although Sultana (1996) has mentioned the 'mutual disregard' between practitioners who host student teachers and teacher educators, a situation which presumably impacts upon students' own views of the relative merits of workplace and institutional learning.

Most authors agree that careful preparation and debriefing of students in work placements can aid integration of the placement experience into the rest of the

curriculum, as well as dealing with potential and actual problems. However, it is unusual for VET curricula to include time to enable this to occur, although the generic NSW TAFE work placement modules allow time for debriefing (Souter 2000). Funding for VET courses is linked closely to delivery time for modules, and, more recently, to units of competence, and so teaching time is not funded for such briefing and debriefing activities. Similarly, time allowances for teachers to visit students on work experience have generally been reduced by VET providers (Caven 2000).

assessment

There are a variety of arrangements for assessment in the VET sector. They may be carried out by the workplace supervisor or the college teacher or a combination of both; assessment of the placement may or may not be an integral part of the whole course. Employers request assistance with assessment and with standard assessment tools (Helms & Nelson 1997). Training packages may lead to increased assessment-related stresses as they introduce a new formality into the system, and particularly at the higher levels of the AQF. Assessment in the workplace against competency standards as part of the requirements of a course requires that the workplace has all relevant equipment. Some workplaces have particular difficulties or restrictions (for instance, the custodial environment). Thus a requirement for formal assessment may jeopardise many work placements (Basic Work Skills Training Division 1995).

While assessment of specific skills may be difficult, assessment of generic skills may be even more problematic. All sectors of education currently have a focus upon generic skills, whether they be called 'key competencies' as in the VET and school sectors, or 'graduate qualities' as in the university sector. A pilot study in Queensland in school education (Queensland Department of Education 1997) found that the only way that key competencies could be assessed was through inference from common work tasks, with the key competencies attributed to certain tasks by a school–industry committee. Moreover, some of these tasks were performed in very few workplaces.

Finally there is the issue of recognition of prior learning. Can students who have already completed paid or unpaid work in the appropriate field claim credit or recognition for this work so they do not have to do the placement? This issue has not yet been raised in the literature, yet as placements become more common in the VET sector it will undoubtedly be raised by students[5]. There are educational issues involved here: research in teacher education (Smith, Brennan & Oczkowski 1998)

finds that those who claim RPL for part of their practicum achieve lower grades than those who do not. Smith, Bennan and Oczkowski (1998) argue that the placement is not as valid a learning experience when completed in isolation from associated provider-based training.

finding and keeping host employers

There are a number of different systems for approaching host employers; for instance, some courses require students to find their own placements, others do not. Where employers are being approached by a range of educational institutions this may create confusion. Recruitment of host employers is relatively easy in university courses where a close link already exists, or where there is a small number of employers for whom they are preparing workers, for example in teaching and nursing. This is not often the case in the VET sector. Within VET, some fields of study find it easier to locate and recruit host employers than do others. Moreover, some employers are very selective in whom they will take. Students may compete vigorously for what are perceived to be the 'better' placements.

Employers may drop out of placement programs because they find that work placement students take up too much time and energy to supervise. Even when managers agree to take students, their staff may resist (Keating & Zbar 1994). Figgis (1998b) reports that non-management staff often have to be talked into agreeing to have a placement student. A bad experience with one student will often cause an employer to refuse to accept any more (Shilling 1989); however, a good experience will make employers enthusiastic about placement programs.

As important as availability may be accessibility (Keating & Zbar 1994): in rural areas some students have to spend considerable time and money on travel to get to placements (Basic Work Skills Training Division 1995). The quality of host employer is, or should be, as important as quantity: there are wide variations in quality that may be difficult to predict before placements are made. Vo (1996) suggests that educational institutions should focus on employers with a high proportion of entry-level positions and Smith and Smith (1996) that high-quality placements are most likely in those companies who take on trainees.[6] When placements are found to be unsuitable, co-ordinators need to decide whether to withdraw students and whether to exclude the employer from what may already be an uncomfortably short list of possible host employers.

resourcing

Proper administration and monitoring of work placements is expensive and time-consuming and also relies to a large extent on the energy and enthusiasm of individual co-ordinators (Keating & Zbar 1994). The importance of these individuals' expertise seems greater than in other educational roles, perhaps because of the range of skills and knowledge required. Ryan (1997) in the school sector suggests that staff development is likely to be one of the major costs in implementing placement programs. There is no discussion in the Australian literature of any VET staff development programs relating to placements.

Managers in VET providers may see work placements as a cheap delivery option, and State training systems may under-fund them. Yet effective work placements are not cheap. Truly effective work placement programs may require a great deal of resourcing and so it may be more expedient to focus on short, sub-optimal, programs (Bailey 1996). The competitive nature of the modern VET sector means that information on resourcing issues is unlikely to be shared (Caven 2000).

challenges for students

While most students report positive experiences in their placements (Misko 1998a), they also face many challenges. Watts (1991b) suggests that students are not employees but are learners, yet the idea of the placement is for them to get the experience of being workers. This is paradoxical and can lead to confusion. Ashworth and Saxton (1992) in a study of sandwich courses in the UK report that students see themselves as 'the meat in the sandwich'. 'Students' are an accepted part of some organisations—such as educational ones—but in many they are not; students are unsure what they are entitled to, or where their allegiance lies. Their host employer may denigrate their educational institution and vice versa.

Students may experience pressure to conform to workplace mores even if they are inappropriate. For example, Wellington (1992) gives the example of a work placement where 'girlie' pictures were on the wall of the lunchroom. The young woman on this placement had not felt able to complain to the company. Alternatively, companies may flout the safety rules, accuracy standards or procedures that the student has learned in their educational institution. A poor placement or work experience has the potential to damage self-esteem and attitude to work (Smith & Smith 1996). Where formal assessment is involved, the consequences may be even more serious: if an employer has the responsibility for assessing a student, then the student is powerless to challenge any inappropriate practices.

There is a need for detailed, perhaps ethnographic, studies of what it is actually like to be a student on placement. Surveys do not capture the processes of settling into placements and do not generally uncover the real challenges; only those imagined by researchers. Studies of the experiences of workers in host organisations who work with placement students are also required. Generally, employer surveys involve only managers or trainers, rarely including the perspectives of other workers or their unions.

practices **promoting effective** work **placements**

Watts (1991a) has described eight roles employers play in work placements: recruiter, job designer, trainer, supervisor, godparent (Watts was referring to the school sector), model, assessor and debriefer. Some of these roles are the same as those which employers play in relation to ordinary employees, but others are different. The sheer range of these roles implies that much can go astray. However, this list also provides a basis for understanding what is expected of employers and for examining 'good practice'. There is clearly scope for empirical research in the processes involved in each of the roles. Placement co-ordinators employed by the educational provider obviously need to be highly skilled in understanding and dealing with all of the issues implied by their relationships with employers fulfilling these diverse roles. There need to be clear expectations of all parties to the placement, and mutual respect between training provider and employer.

Employers generally prefer co-ordinators to maintain close contact with them (Helms & Nelson 1997), which is understandable given the complexity of their role. More support from educational institutions for students is also recommended. From the workplace perspective, a 'good' host employer will exhibit a work placement 'culture' among all workers in a company, not just among senior management or the human resource department. In such a company, front-line managers and shop-floor workers will be willing to help placement students settle in and learn.

The values and attitudes of the workplace mentor are crucial in the success of work placements. 'The importance of good interpersonal skills [in the mentor] shines forth as the single most important factor in promoting learning' (Marriott 1991, p.269, quoted in Cleminson & Bradford 1996, p.253; Harris et al. 1998, p.211). A single mentor is often recommended for students, but mentors often feel their role is not appreciated by the educational provider (Goodfellow 1998, pp.43–4). Training for mentors is often advocated, but they often show little interest in attending the training that is provided (Basic Work Skills Training Division 1995).

Research has uncovered some findings about the best structure for placements. Teese, Davies and Ryan (1997) in the school sector concluded that students found longer placements more beneficial than shorter placements. Employers have also made similar comments (Keating & Zbar 1994). However, time for placements always competes with other demands in the curriculum. A Victorian study in small and medium businesses found that a day a week was the preferred structure rather than block release (Helms & Nelson 1997). However, some employers may prefer shorter placements, or block placements; preferences depended on the nature of the industry and the commitment employers are prepared to make to placements. Block placements may create timetabling difficulties for VET providers. It is generally agreed that employers prefer students near the end of their courses as they have more skills (Basic Work Skills Training Division 1995), but this might not be desirable in educational terms.

Challenges in structuring successful placements are so substantial that Poczik (1995), in the USA suggests that work placements need the intervention of governmental agencies and a publicity campaign aimed at employers, unions and parents to make them effective. However, Australian practice has been for successful placements to grow from close networks and relationships between educational providers and employers on a local basis.

access and equity issues

Just as there are inequities in access to employment, so there are inequities in access to work placements. Some students may have better access to placements (or to higher quality placements), either because they may have their own networks and contacts which enable them to find placements, or because they are more acceptable to employers because of their race, gender or language skills (Smith & Keating 1997). Aboriginal students may only be able to get into Aboriginal organisations (in some cases, the Aboriginal community only wants them to be placed in Aboriginal organisations, for example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Training Advisory Council 1998). Students who are 'different' may find placement uncomfortable even if access is successfully gained. Some employers' preferences to select students, rather than taking students who are allocated, may impact on equity of access (Basic Work Skills Training Division 1995). Courses run in metropolitan areas are likely to have access to a larger and more diverse range of employers, although employers in rural areas may be more supportive of work placements (Smith & Smith 1996). Women's participation in training may be affected

by child-care responsibilities (Courtenay, Manner & Connole 1997) and, while provider delivery methods may allow for flexibility, work placements rarely allow for flexible times.

Moreover, it has been shown that access to placements may be greatly affected by personal contacts between individual teachers and individual employers (Sweet 1995), so that students with less proactive teachers may lose out. A report on pre-apprenticeship courses in NSW TAFE found that, when work placements were not a compulsory part of the course, some course co-ordinators simply refused to organise placements (Basic Work Skills Training Division 1995). Initiatives such as the funding of regional co-ordinators through the Australian Student Traineeship Foundation (for schools) and NSW TAFE may help to redress this type of inequity.
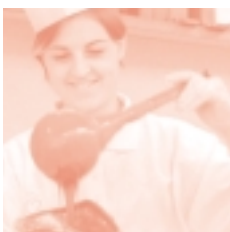
findings and directions for future research

summary of findings

This review set out to synthesise the literature on work placements from the various educational sectors in order to inform policy and practice in the VET sector. The authors conclude that, while this literature is extensive (although far less so in the VET sector), it tends to be sector-specific, discipline-related, mostly positive and uncritical ('success stories'), focussed on administrative practicalities to the relative neglect of the more important issues such as learning, cultural tensions, and roles and identities. It is also somewhat confused by the juxtapositioning of work placements with work experiences and general workplace training, and by different nomenclatures across sectors. Moreover, it tends to be almost exclusively based on perceptual evidence, and is predominantly framed from the educational institutions' perspective.

The greatest volume of literature is found in the university sector, with some in the school sector and relatively little in the VET sector. This may reflect the relative incidence of work placements in each sector, although it is more likely to be the consequence of factors, such as the longer history of placements in many university professions and the publishing culture within that sector. Features in the VET sector like the multiplicity of employment, numerous study mixes and the many different ways in which VET students experience workplaces would contribute to this lesser volume of literature.

The review has also highlighted many critical challenges in work placements, such as resourcing, professional development, tensions between workplace and provider cultures, variations in quality of workplace learning environments and equity in access.

The review has also highlighted many critical challenges in work placements, such as resourcing, professional development, tensions between workplace and provider cultures, variations in quality of workplace learning environments and equity in access. The issue of quality in particular has been underlined; work placements are very dependent on the calibre and orientation of the workplace mentor(s) and on the breadth and depth of experience possible in any particular workplace.

The lack of a coherent cross-sectoral literature means that the wheel is re-invented many times, which may account for the number of 'how-to' manuals within each sector. The plethora of 'advice manuals' implies also that the issues tend not to be addressed in the training given to those employed by educational providers who are responsible for co-ordinating placements. This point has been made by Keating and Zbar (1994) in relation to teacher education for the school sector. There is a clear need for initial teacher training and staff development alike to include rigorous and critical preparation for the role.

diversity

While the piecemeal nature of the literature on placements is frustrating in its fragmentation, the complexity in the issues discussed is necessitated to some extent by the specificity in each situation. Just as Martin (1996) claimed that each university profession has its own qualities, attributes and practices, so too does the VET sector display tremendous variety in training and work placement traditions, organisational size, industry type, qualified mentors, desired learning outcomes and so on.

role of the student

The literature clearly reveals that students on placement are in an ambiguous situation. The student resembles a migrant adolescent growing up in two worlds, or a traveller in a foreign country, where one leaves the familiarity of one environment (the provider) and journeys into a less familiar context (the workplace) with a mix of apprehension of the relative unknown and a desire to learn. In this situation, role and identity can be ambiguous and problematic, for the individual is essentially a 'visitor', in the enterprise but not part of it. Is he/she a learner or a cheap source of labour, a temporary junior or a potentially future employee? At times the relationship may also resemble a courtship, in which employer and student are checking each other out in terms of a possible future relationship (employment), a case of 'trying before buying' for both parties. In this situation, there are many opportunities for ethnographic research into the experiences of what it is like to be in these roles, the

findings of which would contribute a deeper understanding of the roles and expectations involved in work placements.

assumptions in the literature

This study has found that much (but by no means all) of the literature and practice on work placements is predicated on a number of commonly held assumptions:

- ✦ that work placements are inherently worthwhile
- ✦ that all workplaces are equally effective sites for learning
- ✦ that workplaces are equal sites of learning by comparison with educational providers
- ✦ that key players involved in work placements are wholeheartedly committed to, and adequately equipped for promoting student learning
- ✦ that the learning which takes place is meaningful to students and can be integrated with the learning which takes place in their educational institution
- ✦ that costs are of minimal concern
- ✦ that there is no problem relating to the number of workplaces available and accessible for placements

areas of contestation

However, as has been discussed, the literature is not always in one accord on these matters. They are contested areas for further research, and none of the above assumptions is totally justified. There are many factors that impinge on the organisation and effectiveness of work placements and many issues that need to be carefully considered in their planning, design and implementation.

There are two key areas of contestation. One is the nature of the workplace: is it oppressive and exploitative (the less common assumption) or is it a benign place where learning happens all the time (the more common assumption)? The second is the nature of the learning: what learning is desired, what actually is learned and how does one know? Emerging out of these two contestable areas is the critical issue of roles, particularly of the learner, but also of the provider and the workplace 'mentor' or 'supervisor'. While pockets of the literature address one or other of these aspects, there is little agreement and many gaps are left untouched. This state of affairs furnishes both the urgent need and the window of opportunity for a great deal of empirical and, particularly, ethnographic research in this area.

placements in the VET sector

Lessons cannot simply be transplanted unaltered to VET from schools and universities, since there are considerable variations between the sectors—in history, tradition, nature of students and so on. Also, within the VET sector there are considerable differences between industries. Thus there is a need to establish a broader literature in the VET sector rather than simply borrowing from other sectors. There is clearly a need for a 'mapping' project to examine the extent and nature of placements in VET. However, the lack of success in accessing appropriate policy and curriculum personnel for the study's stakeholder consultations suggests that this would be a difficult process. Since there may be quite large variations across industries there is also scope for research on 'industry placement tradition', similar to 'industry training tradition'. There is also considerable diversity among VET students: some may have a long working experience, others may have little or none. All of this raises the issue of the purpose of placements in each instance: is it to learn *about* the workplace or *in* the workplace? For younger, inexperienced, students, the former might be more important; for mature students who already have experience of workplaces, the latter may be more appropriate.

There has been no mapping of the extent and nature of work placements in the VET sector as there has been in the school sector. The problem in obtaining useful responses in our stakeholder consultations suggests this would be a difficult exercise, but a necessary one. For example, if placements are mainly for younger students, then general work education is an important component of them, but if they are mainly for those already experienced in the workforce, then skills training may be the major desired outcome.

From this study of work placement literature and practice, quality appears to be a major issue. In particular, quality of the student learning experiences and quality in assessment practices are two key areas. However, these are very difficult areas when VET providers have little or no control over what employers/workplaces do, nor over skills of workplace mentors. Further research is needed to confirm anecdotal evidence of quality problems. As Hughes, Moore and Bailey (1999, p.37) note:

> Poor placements can lead to dismal, miseducative experiences, but quality work-based learning can provide benefits above and beyond what students get even in excellent classrooms.

In relation to quality, there tends to be little in the research literature on learning outcomes. This is probably because of the number and immediacy of the organisational problems involved, meaning that the focus is firmly on these practical

issues. What is learned, what is supposed to be learned and how much of this is captured by current assessment processes needs to be researched and articulated. And what happens if expectations are not clarified or are shared?

The curious paradox in the VET sector is that, while work placements may be under serious threat because of shrinking resources and constricting quality placement possibilities, the pressure for them is likely to increase as a result of the strong pressure for 'real-world' learning and 'authentic' assessment, and such recent VET policy initiatives as training packages and the growth of VET in schools. An implicit assumption on the part of policy-makers seeking a greater proportion of workplace-based assessment that workplaces will wear this influx of students needs testing.

Such evidence as is available, suggests that those enterprises who participate in work placements are those with better human resource and training programs. While the cause is unclear, increased placements could possibly be a positive 'lever' in stimulating training/learning cultures within industry. Having students on work placements may promote the need for a climate of learning and development, and may provide practical opportunities for those in workplaces to develop further their mentoring, training and assessing skills.

areas for **further research**

The study has highlighted a wide range of possibilities for future research into work placements in the VET sector. These include:

  ✦ a mapping exercise of VET sector work placements

  ✦ experiences of students and workplace mentors during placements—what is it like to be a student on placement, and what is it like being a workplace mentor for placement students?

  ✦ power relationships in the workplace and their effects on student learning during work placements

  ✦ roles and identities in what is labelled in the literature as the 'tripod' arrangement (Le-Clercq 1992)—the student, the provider mentor and the workplace mentor

  ✦ examination of union attitudes and attitudes of other workers towards work placements and 'placed' students

  ✦ in-depth analysis of the actual learning undertaken by students

  ✦ the skills employed by VET practitioners who arrange and monitor placements

- relative strengths of alternative models and approaches, such that empirical research can begin to inform the development of robust theoretical models for use cross-sectorally

- access and equity issues, such as the availability of placements in particular locations and industries, and for particular types of students

- the processes involved in managing placements and maintaining host employers

- assessment during placements, and the issue of recognition of prior learning

- the impact of training packages upon the number and nature of placements in VET courses

- a follow-up study of students who have completed placements

implications

The following implications for stakeholders within the VET sector arise from the study.

For *practitioners*, a need for:

- careful consideration in recruiting and keeping host employers

- close monitoring of workplaces for quality in the learning environments which they provide for placement students

- a need for clarification of mutual expectations and responsibilities

- attention to the preparation of students before, support during, and debriefing after undertaking work placements

- recognition of the student as the 'meat in the sandwich'

- maintaining a constant dialogue with host employers

- access to information and literature about good practice in work placement policies, arrangements and practices

- access to professional development about the work placement process

In *policy terms*, a need for:

- gathering and dissemination of information about work placement policies, arrangements and practices

- a recognition of the problems inherent to work placements to enable their being adequately addressed

- official encouragement (and perhaps including incentives) for employers to participate, given that benefits for them beyond their philanthropic contribution to the 'social good' are often not evident

- greater, and critical, attention to what happens to students on placements and what they learn

- partnership and dialogue with providers of VET teacher-training to ensure inclusion of placement issues in the curriculum for VET teachers

- provision of professional development for work placement co-ordinators

- adequate resourcing of work placements, particularly time to carefully prepare and debrief students, and for providers to visit and support students during placement, activities not always funded within current formulae

- funding of further research in the 'gap areas' identified in this review

For *providers*, a need for:

- professional development for (both provider and workplace) co-ordinators involved in work placement arrangements

- a more co-ordinated approach to placements as an important and cross-disciplinary component of the curriculum

- clarification for all parties of the purpose of each placement and an evaluation of placements against those purposes

- adequate resourcing of placements rather than viewing them as a cheap alternative to on-campus delivery

The literature and available research reveal that, while there are many challenges and possible points of failure, work placements hold tremendous potential. However, this potential can only be realised where the aims of placements are made clear, environments are conducive to learning, all participants are adequately equipped, and policies and information are clear and encouraging.

notes

1   While the growth in school-based apprenticeships and traineeships is interesting, it has no real relevance to this study as students in such programs are employed by their workplaces; thus their workplace experiences cannot be regarded as work placements. Moreover, many other school students are employed in part-time traineeships which are not connected with their schooling at all (Main, 2000).

2   JSST is now known as 'TAFE delivered vocational HSC courses'.

3   The CIT booklet also refers to work-placement preparation workshops, which it states all students going on placements should attend.

4   However, Misko's population includes students on work experience as well as those on placements.

5   In the NSW TAFE pre-apprenticeship study (Basic Work Skills Training Division, 1995), the fact that most of the (hospitality) students at one college were already working part-time in the industry was used as a reason by one co-ordinator not to arrange placements.

6   Smith & Smith's assertion was based on research carried out prior to recent reports showing widespread abuses of the traineeship system.

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stakeholders interviewed

State Training Authorities and TAFE systems in all States and Territories were contacted. However, lines of responsibility for work placements often appeared to be confused. As a result only a few authorities were able to supply contacts for the research. Those interviewed are cited above in the references.

Teachers participating in the focus group at Douglas Mawson Institute of TAFE, Adelaide, South Australia were:

Name	Field of study
Terry Hansen	Printing & graphic arts
Andrew McGowan	Printing & graphic arts
Chris Hewison	Aboriginal education
Graham Ball	Logistics (warehousing)
John Wilson	Automotive
Gordon Boyce	Automotive
Harriet Barry	Community services (youth work)
Italia Parletta	Child studies
Rita Siow	Advertising & graphic design

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This review of research on vocational education and training is one of a series of reports commissioned to guide the development of future national research and evaluation priorities.

Erica Smith is executive director of the South Australian Wholesale, Retail and Personal Services Industry Training Advisory Board (WRAPS ITAB). Prior to this she was an academic, teaching vocational education, and training practitioner at Charles Sturt University. In previous careers as a personnel manager and TAFE teacher, she has had considerable experience with students on work placements.

Roger Harris has had extensive experience in vocational education and training (VET) teacher training and VET research at the University of South Australia. He is currently director of CREEW (Centre for Research in Education, Equity and Work), one of the recognised research centres within that university. His recent work includes a number of funded projects on roles of workplace trainers, VET staff development, apprenticeships and traineeships, work placements, training packages and workplace learning.