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from urban and regional planning**

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Academic standards for work integrated learning: a case study from urban and regional planning

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Work integrated learning (WIL) may be gaining a greater profile within higher education but the question of academic standards for WIL is central to securing its place in a quality learning and teaching agenda. This presents distinctive challenges. The purposes of WIL are many and varied. It is readily aligned to a range of topical imperatives for universities. The diverse parties to WIL activity – students, employers, educators, professionals – bring their own perspectives to these debates. The development of academic standards has to be cast in this context. Creating a constructive meeting place between academic standards and WIL requires a considered re-appraisal of both.

This research-based paper reports on a project conducted in Australia and funded by the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. The project team comprises members from RMIT University, Griffith University and La Trobe University. The project investigates academic standards and associated assessment practices through interviews, focus groups and consultations with key parties involved in practice education in urban and regional planning. Whilst the project focuses on one particular industry, the paper emphasises findings that are transferable to other disciplines and professions. The paper makes a contribution to the current design of academic standards and assessment practices suited to the challenges of high quality WIL.

Keywords: academic standards, assessment, work integrated learning, urban and regional planning, placements, learning outcomes

INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses the question of academic standards in work integrated learning (WIL). It introduces broad considerations drawn from the literature and examines them through a particular case study that focuses on the profession of urban and regional planning*.

* The Planning Institute of Australia, the professional body, describes the work of planners in this way: “Planners are professionals who specialise in developing strategies and design the communities in which we live, work and play. Balancing the built and natural environment, community needs, cultural significance, and economic sustainability, planners aim to improve our quality of life and create vibrant communities” (PIA, 2005, p. 1).

The case study is the result of a project funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC, formerly known as the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education). The project team comprises staff from RMIT University, Griffith University and La Trobe University, in Australia. The project falls under the ALTC priority program on academic standards and assessment practices. The ALTC is a government funded body charged with enhancing the quality of higher education in Australia.*

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

For the purpose of this paper, the WIL activities are assumed to be ones that attract credit within an academic program. That is, they count towards successful completion of the overall degree. Of course, WIL takes many forms. In this paper, the case study is of structured work placements in urban and regional planning. Students spend time within a host organisation undertaking learning activities in pursuit of objectives defined by the relevant university course of study.

ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND STUDENT WORKPLACE LEARNING: A CONTRADICTION IN TERMS?

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

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

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[†] Commonwealth of Australia (2004). *Higher Education Support Act 2003: Administration guidelines*.

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

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

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

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

ASSESSMENT AND STUDENT WORKPLACE LEARNING: SOME POINTS OF TENSION

In some respects, reconciling academic standards with WIL may seem fairly straightforward. Surely, all one has to do is set assignments that can be assessed in much the same way as any other piece of academic work: a case study; an organisational analysis; a practice evaluation; a reflective essay. At one level, of course this resolves the dilemmas. One can assess from the comfort of the marking room the student's display of analytic, critical and reflective capability. The

application of pre-determined assessment criteria may help ensure consistency (at least according to the recently received wisdoms of good assessment practice), and grades can be moderated as others view the textual evidence. What's the problem? Naturally, it depends. It depends on what it is one is aiming to assess, on what it is that academic standards are standards of.

These kinds of written assignments bring academic standards back into the purview of the university. They are extrinsic, existing apart from the workplace experience; and they can be transported readily into the university. They exist outside of the student who produces them – a 'piece of work' that can be handed in (by the due date). They are evidence that the student has learned how to do the academic task. But if we are talking about authentic assessment, in the sense of assessment fitting to the learning environment, then maybe this solution is not altogether hitting the mark (Wiggins, 1998). It's a solution that reinforces an established understanding of academic standards derived from university-based learning activities. It preserves a sense of academic that is removed from the student experience in the workplace. Perhaps that is inevitable, and not altogether undesirable. If the learning objective is for students to stand aside from the workplace experience and show they can analyse, critique and reflect from the university vantage point what they found in the world of work, then perhaps this is a valid way to do it. Let professional standards take care of the capabilities students display in the workplace, and preserve academic standards in the university domain.

But we can ask: is it possible to have a sense of academic standards not quite so removed from the immediacy of workplace learning that is at the heart of WIL? Are there approaches to academic standards and assessment practices that do not reinforce the separation between what is inside and outside the university domain? Perhaps we need a bit more of a re-think. There are other assessment literatures that can help us with this.

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

It also suggests a rather different emphasis in our approach to formative (low stakes) and summative (high stakes) assessment. In the context of WIL (employability agendas in particular), Knight and Yorke (2003) argue strongly for using learning oriented assessment that is predominantly low stakes and formative in nature. They

question the extent to which the complex learning associated with workplace environments can be captured in a trustworthy way in summative assessment beyond a pass / fail judgement, which may be required especially where professional accreditation looks for warrants of fitness to practice (Knight & Yorke, 2006). Limits to trustworthiness have to do with: contingencies impacting on the learning environment; unpredictability of learning outcomes; and, variability in the quality of learning resources and processes (involving, amongst other things, the contribution of workplace supervisors).

OBSERVATIONS FROM A CASE STUDY IN PLANNING PRACTICE EDUCATION

The ALTC funded project into planning practice education had as its rationale the notion of an inclusive and participative approach to generating academic standards in WIL. That's to say, the project aimed to involve all key stakeholders of structured work placement activities in both its inquiry and action phases. The project confined itself to those planning programs accredited by the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA). It engaged planning educators, planning workplace supervisors and planning students in, variously, interviews and focus groups. It has also consulted with the national education committee of PIA and the association of planning Schools. A review was undertaken of planning programs across Australia, and their forms of practice based education. Literature relevant to academic standards in planning practice education was also reviewed.

Whilst the project has yet to complete all of its inquiries, there are some compelling observations that can be made from the empirical study to date. Perhaps a useful place to start is the overall observation that academic standards and assessment practices in planning practice education occur in a set of overlapping and fluid contexts. The job of a planner, and the institutional settings in which they work, span a great spectrum and are constantly on the move (Thompson, 2007b). The history and legislative framework for planning varies considerably from one state jurisdiction to another (Williams, 2007). The profession has a debateable boundary and status (Marshall, 2007). The labour market has an undersupply of qualified planners (PIA, 2004). University resources for planning education are stretched (PIA, 2004). Meanwhile, the professional accrediting body has recently commissioned a review of planning education (Gurran, Norman & Gleeson, 2008). At the same time, the significance of planning and the built environment for social, economic and environmental prosperity has if anything been gaining in recognition (Thompson, 2007a).

It was striking from the early phases of the inquiry that all planning programs unequivocally endorsed the importance of practice education. Planning educators interviewed for the project (from eleven of the planning schools with professional accreditation) were clearly of the view that professional and practical aspects were foundational to their programs, and that practice education had huge benefits for students and employers. However, there was no consensus amongst them as to how it was best conceived and delivered. There was a commonly expressed ethos of experiential and reflective learning as underpinning practice education. But the respective contributions of university- and work-based learning environments to practice education were construed somewhat differently across the planning schools.

Four main approaches were discernible: the provision of brief encounters with practice; project-based work; structured work placement; and work experience. Structured work placement, the primary focus of the empirical study, was clearly just one form of practice education amongst many to be found in planning programs.

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

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

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

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

Observations from the project's engagement with the student perspective are tentative at this stage; yet again, there are some salient messages to have emerged from discussions held to date. Most students were very positive about the value of their work placement. They felt it gave them experience of what planners actually do and how they do it. It acted both to introduce them to planning practice and to networks for future employment. They gained confidence in their abilities to be planners, accomplish planning work and develop as professionals. Work placement was a steep learning curve, according to many. It was exposing and testing – there could be no hiding in the shadows. Of course, work placement wasn't a happy experience for everyone. Expressed difficulties related to mundane work tasks, absent supervisors, troubles with other staff and balancing placement commitments with other study and life demands.

Though some began to discount the value of university learning, and were critical of how little it had prepared them for the 'realities', others believed that knowledge and theory from university was a part of what they did and meant they noticed what was going on in the workplace. At some level, students appeared aware of the debates surrounding the respective roles of workplace and university learning – and often had opinions about this. As their confidence to perform grew, some were attracted by the paid work on offer and spoke rather dismissively about what university had left to offer beyond the award itself. But many others had pondered the importance of critical thinking and analysis, and wanted the university to forge greater connection between their increased professional competence and their abilities to be critical and reflective practitioners. A significant theme in this respect concerns the way in which students very much located their experience of structured work placement within the academic program as a whole. Their accounts strongly advocated for purposefully linking workplace learning with what comes before and after.

As regards assessment in the workplace, students were generally somewhat hazy. Some felt there weren't any specific goals or benchmarks for them to achieve. Rather, the expectations were often considered to be more general; about the quality of work and how one came across. Whilst their supervisors might be providing a final

report, there was some sense that it didn't carry that much weight in the overall scheme of things. Consequently, it didn't much matter if it remained unclear what the report was based on or how it was compiled; or, in some instances, if a good report was motivated by the employer wanting the student to stay on. More value appeared to be placed on the day to day feedback the student received on work tasks or how they were travelling. When it came to more conventional university assessment tasks related to structured work placement, the students appeared to expect clear criteria to be in place; for example, as to what constituted a good reflective report. Tasks which enabled them to 'round off' their placement experience, by pulling together their thoughts about the experience or analysing an issue they had encountered, seemed to be particularly appreciated.

CONCLUDING COMMENTARY: LIVING ON THE FAULT LINES

Academic standards and assessment practices in planning practice education are at the interface of many fault lines in work integrated learning and higher education. Structured work placements are not easy to sustain or make work well. There are alternative, and often highly innovative, models for practice education that are less dependent on the workplace. Yet when successful, structured work placements bring considerable benefits to students, workplaces and academic programs. However, the learning benefits cluster around those complex learning outcomes that challenge our thinking about academic standards and assessment practices.

By default or perhaps by design, the assessment practices revealed by the planning case study are largely a combination of low stakes, formative assessment in the workplace and higher stakes summative assessment in the university. The workplace contexts and the capacities and dispositions of the workplace supervisors lend themselves to informal, nurturing assessment practices that encourage students to grow in confidence and professional identity. They are in some respects examples of learning-oriented assessment and ones that rests on the intrinsic assessment processes of 'here and now' feedback. This appears to sit well also with planning educators who perceive a number of barriers to introducing more formal and systematic assessment regimes into the workplace experience. Meanwhile, the use of extrinsic assessment tasks that lie more within the control of the university provide the weightier measures of accomplishment and secure a notion of standards that are academic.

As will be apparent, however, this leaves us with several important considerations. Whilst intrinsic, formative assessment may be 'low stakes' in terms of grading, it is nevertheless crucial to the goals of the student learning experience. As commonly stated, work experience by itself doesn't guarantee learning, at either the surface or deeper levels. It is a matter of how the student engages with that experience and transforms it into a learning journey. Arguably, workplace supervisors and university educators have important roles to play in this, and students need to be held accountable for the ways in which they go about it. They still need to perform, even if the performance isn't focussed on the demonstration of prescribed competencies but on their engagement with the learning process. The judicious use of accessories such as learning plans, assessment guides, and capability portfolios may support that process and provide important reference points for all parties. From a regulatory point of view too, there is a delicate line between work experience in industry and the

university direction and management of a learning process geared towards complex learning outcomes. The provision of appropriate learning infrastructures for direct intrinsic, formative assessment needs to be based on clear educational principles.

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

As previously noted, from the student perspective practice education exists within their experience of the program as a whole. Students appear to be very aware of the importance of locating structured work placement, and other practice learning activities, into a wider frame. This is a perpetual challenge that planning educators have to take seriously. Clearly, students value the learning that derives from workplace related experience. Yet this commonly remains disconnected from the overall program, and students are often the first to recognise the implications. Perhaps only when we have generated academic standards that embrace all the varied forms of learning activity we like to offer students will we counter the disjuncture that still characterises much of the student experience.

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