



International students and work experience: Mapping of key research themes

Ref: ATN project: WIL to Work: Enhancing international student capacity through Work Integrated Learning (WIL)

Executive summary and recommendations

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By

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Executive summary

Introduction

International students contribute greatly to the higher education sector in Australia. In 2016 alone, it was reported that approximately 440 000 international students enrolled in programs in Australian universities (Australian Government, 2016; DEEWR, 2009-2016), making the number of international students in Australia the third highest export beside iron ore and coal (Blakkarly, 2017). Moreover, the number of international students across the globe is consistently growing. For this reason it is critical that international students' needs are met through effective and ongoing support.

Many international students have the desire to undertake work experience when living in another country (Ammigan & Jones, 2018). In fact, the international student barometer indicated the desire for international students to receive relevant career advice, work experience, leading to successful employment in their chosen fields (Garrett, 2014). Consequently, many programs international students study include a key work experience¹ component. Such work experience has been referred to as work integrated learning (WIL), practicum, workplacement, field experience, clinical placement and/or internship in the literature (Barton, Hartwig, Bennett, Cain, Campbell, Ferns, Jones, Joseph, Kavanagh, Kelly, Larkin, O'Connor, Podorova, Tangen, & Westerveld, 2017).

Experience in the workplace can present differently for international students compared to their domestic counterparts (Bilsland, Nagy, & Smith, 2014). Not only do international students need to socialise into a new work environment they are often still adapting to the new university and cultural context in which they have been placed. Barton et al. (2017) describe this as a 'multisocialisation' process. Evidence in the literature shows that international students need more time to understand the local requirements and expectations in different workplaces (Rienties, Bart and Nolan, Eimear-Marie, 2014).

This executive summary therefore presents major themes encountered in a comprehensive search of the literature. It will firstly, share some insight into general areas related to international student experience and then secondly, relevant themes related to work experience. Finally, a number of recommendations will be presented to support international students during workplace-based experiences during study programs within Australia.

Process taken to map literature related to WIL and international students

The mapping undertaken for this project was carried out systematically. The goal of the mapping was to explore what both the research literature, and other supporting documents such as university guides, share in relation to international students and work integrated learning, workplacement, professional experience, internships etc. The mapping aimed to provide the bibliographic details of each resource, a brief overview, the type of resource (i.e. journal article, book, blog, written document or university guide), what information is useful in relation to the development of online modules, any issues or barriers, the resource

¹ The term work experience will be used throughout this report.

abstract and information related to the study including where the study was carried out and with whom.

A number of key search terms were used in a variety of search browsers and databases including Google Scholar, Informit and ProQuest and JSTOR. These terms included (but were not limited to):

- International students
- Workplacement
- Professional or field experience
- Professional learning
- Work experience
- Internship
- Practicum
- Clinical placement
- Higher education
- University

Once a resource was identified as being relevant to international student experience and/or workplace experience a thorough reading of the resource took place. A key focus was on resources published after 2014 although a number of other documents were included. Continuous searches occurred until the mapped themes reached saturation, that is, that the same themes kept reoccurring. The next section of this report will now share what these themes were in relation to general international student experience and then specifically about work experience or WIL.

Themes related to international student experience in Australia

Moving to another country to study is both daunting and exciting. There is a lot at stake. Not only do international students have to leave their family and friends and organise their travel and accommodation, they need to adjust to a new cultural context, where often an additional or second language is spoken. It is unsurprising then, that the research literature extensively reports on issues and concerns associated with such change (Abu-Araba & Parry, 2015; Baker, 2017; Sawir, 2013; Sherry, Thomas & Chui, 2010; Wong, 2004).

In 2000, Mori categorised the issues faced by international students as academic, financial, interpersonal, intrapersonal and linguistic. Language is by far the most reported issue for international students' who are mostly English as second language speakers (Carty, Hale, Carty, Williams, Rigney, & Principato, 1998; Crawford & Candlin, 2013; Greenberg, 2013). It is important to note however, that many international students already speak the language of the country in which they choose to study or have this language as an additional language. Further, international students are required to pass strict assessment regimes in order to enrol in foreign study e.g. IELTS. Nevertheless language support is necessary particularly if academic requirements and expectations differ to what international students have previously experienced (Crawford & Candlin, 2013; Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010)

Studying in another country is expensive and the stress of finance on international students is significant (Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010; Temple, Callender, Grove, & Kersh, 2016). So too, are the rules and regulations such as visa requirements. These issues are regularly experienced by international students so it is important that universities have the necessary

support systems available. In relation to interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, it has been reported that international students tend to socialise with other international students, in particular from their own home countries, rather than seek out involvement with others (Tran & Pham, 2016). The same studies note that universities and other external organisations need processes to support and increase international students' confidence levels in meeting new people.

Each of these themes relate directly to workplace experiences. The next section therefore outlines how these themes impact on international students' before, during and after such workplace experiences as well as other issues that may arise.

Themes related to international student workplace experience

The workplace experience for international students is generally assessed and therefore places pressure on students to pass their studies. Consequently, when the workplace experience is not a positive one it can have a serious impact of whether or not international students continue with their study programs. The literature points to similar issues as outlined previously but of course, these relate directly to how international students socialise into different professions including the workplace environment (Barton et al, 2017; Barton, Hartwig & Le, 2018).

Issues related to language proficiencies, and with a particular focus on professional communication skills, as well as understanding new cultural contexts were highlighted in the literature. It was noted that both language and cultural concerns become more complex when considering workplace environments (Hughes & More, 1997; Spooner-Lane, Tangen & Campbell, 2009; Welch, Vo-Tran, Pittayachawan, & Reynolds, 2012). Not only does an international student need to utilise effective communication and vocabulary from the profession in which they study, they also need to understand and negotiate within the 'culture' of that workplace context (Lilley, Nulty & Stewart, 2008).

Other concerns reported in the literature include the communication channels between the university, workplace and international student before, during and after the work placement (Newton, Pront, & Giles, 2016). Often there is miscommunication and differing expectations that could be solved relatively quickly; ensuring success for the international student as well as benefits for the workplace supervisor (Ozek, 2009; Panos, 2005).

Additionally, international students were often not aware of the support systems available or did not access these when needed before, during or after work placement (Barton & Hartwig, 2017; Billett, 2011; Celik, 2008). Issues such as not being able to rely on their usual support networks, such as family and friends during work placement (particularly due to time differences) were raised in the literature.

On the other hand a number of benefits are provided in the literature for all parties (Doyle, Gendall, Meyer, Hoek, Tait, McKenzie, & Looiparg, 2010; Jackson & Greenwood, 2015). Many have noted how the supervisor/s or hosts of international students value the richness that international students bring to the work context. This includes incorporating their language and diversity skills in working with clients e.g. translating business transactions etc.

Barton et al's (2017) study highlighted a range of recommendations for improved practice related to international students and work placement including:

- Create a welcoming workplace environment including a student work space, clear expectations and open lines of communication.
- Embrace and utilise international students' unique cultural knowledge and experience in your workplace.
- Include a diverse range of communication techniques to explain key concepts about the workplace context.
- Encourage international students to become involved in the wider workplace community.
- Provide international students regular feedback and demonstrate strategies for improvement and check for understanding.

For university staff the same authors offered these recommendations:

- Organise a meeting with international students and their supervisor prior to work placement, as well as post-placement sessions with university staff.
- Encourage international students to gain experience in new cultural and professional contexts through volunteering.
- Include a range of teaching and learning activities such as role plays, videos and critical reflection to assist international students' understanding of Australian workplace contexts.
- Create a community of learners through multimedia to encourage communication during work placement.
- Share responsibility of feedback and assessment to allow a fuller understanding of the student's progress.

And for workplace staff and supervisors:

- Create a welcoming workplace environment including a student work space, clear expectations and open lines of communication.
- Embrace and utilise international students' unique cultural knowledge and experience in your workplace.
- Include a diverse range of communication techniques to explain key concepts about the workplace context.
- Encourage international students to become involved in the wider workplace community.
- Provide international students regular feedback and demonstrate strategies for improvement and check for understanding.

Overall, many concerns are raised in the literature when discussion of international students' experience with WIL, work placement, work experience etc. occurs. There is limited information related to the successes that international students and their hosts experience – a factor that is emerging in the research.

Recommendations

1. Consider a range of communication factors including:

a. Improved communication between all stakeholders

It is not surprising that communication between all stakeholders involved in the work placement should be effective, timely and clear. Such communication should also be ongoing throughout the work placement. In fact, some studies have highlighted how there is often a lack of contact prior to the work placement, suggesting rich connections are more likely to ensure success.

Therefore it is recommended that universities have comprehensive plans, expectations and timelines about the ways in which they communicate with workplaces before, during and after the workplace experience. Such activities could include online engagement and contact that encourages international students to lead discussions with each other and their supervisors. (see Billett, Cain & Le, 2018; Jackson & Greenwood, 2015; Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher, & Pretto, 2009; Sonnenschein, Barker, & Hibbins, 2018)

b. Recognition of the importance of global 21st century communication

Another notion related to communication was how universities and their students need to consider global forms of communication and therefore international experiences in order to improve employability. A number of resources suggest the use of a range of ways to communicate with students, workplaces and universities globally including online, face-to-face, through interactive image and sound, and oral and written communication. Such communication supports the growth and development of people in a trans-mobile and diverse world. (see Harvey, Robinson & Frohman, 2013; Skrbiš, 2014)

c. Using a range of learning and teaching strategies to communicate information

International students learn best through a range of activities. Therefore will preparing students for work placement and even in the workplace a range of strategies should be utilised to share information. Methods such as interactive delivery, activities in small groups, use of video clips, reflective feedback sessions, open discussions, illustrating ideas through mind mapping, images, simulations, role plays, volunteering, drawing and modelling to support learning are offered in the literature. Learning styles are not necessarily culturally based and tend to be individual dispositions. However, adjustments to western-based approaches to teaching is recommended in order to address international students' varying needs. (see Boughton, Halliday & Brown, 2010; Elliot, 2017).

2. Understand that language and culture is 'both ways'

As stated previously, language can be a barrier for some international students. As such, the systems set up in universities for support need to be continued but reviewed in order to determine if they are a. running effectively and b. used regularly by international students. Further, it is important that those working with and supporting international students value the richness and linguistic diversity that they bring to their new contexts. In fact, language can be used as a strength and resource in various situations particularly work placement. For example, international students can assist businesses that have international clients

where translation is required. Not only should international students be expected to negotiate within new language and cultural domains but so too, should those working with and supporting international students. This means that culture and language is recognised 'both ways'—meaning international students learn about their new cultural context but universities also learn about language diversity from international students (see Hughes & More, 1997; Spooner-Lane, Tangen & Campbell, 2009; Welch, Vo-Tran, Pittayachawan, & Reynolds, 2012).

3. Appreciate and support the multi-socialisation process that international students face

International students who undertake work placement have to socialise not only in the professional workplace context, but they are also continuing to socialise in new cultural and university contexts. Often work placement occurs for long periods of time (e.g. up to 16 weeks full-time in social work) making it difficult for students to continuing any paid work. Unsurprisingly, this puts a great deal of stress and pressure on students. Universities should be prepared to support international students throughout the duration of their work placement in a variety of ways including setting up online networks, face-to-face meetings if possible, support materials and resources and other means of communication. Workplaces and supervisors also need to acknowledge that international students have different needs to domestic students due to the multisocialisation process. (see Barton, 2017 and 2018)

4. Build effective networks both personally and professionally – before, during and after work experience

Related to effective communication is the recommendation that international students build effective networks both personally and professionally throughout their study programs. A number of reports highlight that international students tend to interact with people from their own social and cultural groupings but equally universities do not have systems in place to encourage contact with domestic students. A result of improving such interaction is the increase of support networks that assist when international students may experience personal issues such as homesickness, loneliness or illness or even concerns about visa requirements and other regulations.

Further, it is reported that international students may not necessarily know about or frequent university support services that exist. Clearer communication and marketing about these services is warranted. In addition to the already existing services, specific networks for work placement purposes is needed. (see Billett, 2011; Doyle, Gendall, Meyer, Hoek, Tait, McKenzie, & Loorparg, 2010; Mikkonen, Elo, Kuivila, Tuomikoski, & Kääriäinen, 2016)

5. Consider a broader scope of workplace opportunities for international students

Workplace opportunities for international students are offered in diverse ways depending on the disciplinary area undertaken but these should be regularly reviewed in light of how working life is constantly changing. For example, students can already do work placement off-shore in their own home countries in some programs but not others. Some international students' programs have compulsory work placements while others are electives only. Work experience can be offered in a variety of ways including online, on-campus, industry-based, and in local, regional, national or global contexts. Universities should review current options and gauge whether they are the most effective approaches or not.

Related to a wider scope of workplace opportunities is the need to educate employers and potential hosts or supervisors of international students. Such professional learning needs to include information about visa requirements, language proficiencies and professional competencies international students already hold. Greater attention to matching international students with workplaces is also recommended where possible. (see Devereux, 2004; Harvey, Robinson & Frohman, 2013; Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010; Tran & Soejatminah, 2016)

6. Share positive experiences of international students on work placement with others

As already outlined the majority of the literature reports on the negative aspects or issues related to international students' study generally as well as their workplace experiences. Limited exposure of and focus on positive outcomes and success stories is available although this is emerging. In reality most international student pass their work experience or placement despite facing a number of difficulties. It is imperative that universities develop more robust processes in supporting international students and their supervisors throughout the work experience. Simply finding a placement (if that occurs at all) is not enough.

Many positive benefits can result for all parties from work placements for international students. Explicitly sharing these stories can be extremely powerful and a wonderful resources for others. (see Barton, 2017; Barton & Hartwig, 2018/forthcoming; Jenner, 2018; Lillyman & Bennett, 2014; Sahin, 2008)

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