EDUCATION FOR PRACTICE TOPICS:

Addressing individual workplace learning needs for under-represented student groups

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Why WPL and UR student groups?

From the start, we need to acknowledge the challenge of addressing individual needs in under-represented (UR) student groups, and encourage a contextual reading of this paper for the variety of professional practice fields at CSU. The purpose of this occasional paper is to encourage academic and professional staff involved with workplace learning (WPL) to enhance the effectiveness and impact of WPL programs for under-represented (UR) student groups in order to assist these students to remain enrolled and persist with learning. To achieve this we start with the contention that UR groups should not be used to perpetuate notions of normal WPL and 'otherness' but rather to ideas and strategies for fostering productive WPL experiences. In this paper we discuss the importance of addressing UR groups in WPL programs, locate CSU students on a map of UR groups, review pertinent literature, present findings emerging from our empirical study currently underway and offer reflexive tips and links to support good WPL practices for UR groups.

What is an UR student group?

UR student groups comprise students who are marginalised due to their experience of equity and access issues in entry to and progression through studying at university (Australian Government Department of Education, 2014; Carrington & Pratt, 2003; West, Fleming, & Finnegan, 2013). UR groups may include:

- mature age students
- students with disabilities
- students from a non-English speaking background (NESB)
- students who are 'first in family' to attend university
- low SES students identified via home residence and employment
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) students
- students with a home location specified as regional and remote
- women studying non-traditional courses such as science, business, agriculture, architecture, engineering, technology.

Why consider UR university students in WPL?

WPL experiences of UR student groups and related staff practices are an under-researched and ill-understood (Orrell, 2011). WPL can be a financial and logistical burden for students because of time demands of family, caring responsibilities and paid work, financial burdens linked to forfeiting paid work while attending placements (where students are unpaid), being away from home, paying double rent, and lack of recognition of previous work experience in the field of study (Patrick, Peach, & Pocknee, 2008). This burden is typically amplified for UR students as they often experience WPL as a "fish out of water" (West et al., 2013), and if they are viewed as a hindrance rather than an asset within the workplace.

Apart from financial and logistical burdens, issues of limited social and cultural capital or readiness to engage with workplace cultures should also be considered as they can impact on the students' professional identity development (Anderson, 2005). UR student groups often have limited access to professional networks, poor understandings of professional language, conduct and dress codes and may therefore heavily rely on mentors. Positive WPL experiences can lead to opportunities for building professional relationships, managing realistic expectations of workplace conditions, and sustaining these through professional networks (Gardner & Perry, 2011).

Understanding how factors such as culture impact on learning may enable UR student groups to "claim space for self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem; or, quite simply, become more fully and agentically themselves" (West et al., 2013, p. 132).

What is the current discourse on WPL and UR student groups?

Leaders in the discourse and scholarship of WPL and UR students include teacher education, social work, nursing and occupational therapy. Papers from these fields have dealt with topics relating to disability, NESB and regional UR groups. (See reference list below.) We found no papers dedicated to first in family or ATSI students.

Research literature dealing with the WPL experiences of UR student groups reveals these students' self-determination and persistence in learning, and the confidence they often gained for their future professions through placements (Brown, James, & Mackenzie, 2006), and the empathy shown towards them motivated their learning and performance in the workplace (Riddick, 2003). However, growth in self-esteem for UR student groups can be hindered through restrictive placements and reduced WPL expectations of these students (Hearn, Short, & Healy, 2014), especially when students were perceived as a burden (Morris & Turnbull, 2007) or have demanding placement expectations (Georgiou, Espahbodi, & De Souza, 2011).

Furthermore, the studies found that UR student groups experienced challenges in professional identity development when isolated from peers and university lecturers in rural communities (Ussher, 2010), in negotiating workplaces' cultural understandings and expectations that were different to their cultural and NESB (Spooner-Lane, Tangen, & Campbell, 2009) or, for some students, locating their Indigenous understandings within the dominant culture (Sinner, 2010; Sexton, 2011).

Hearn et al (2014) argue that the challenges and needs faced by UR students should be thought of as 'invisible' disabilities, alongside such factors as mental health problems, when planning support processes and information confidentially communicated about students. Ortlipp and Nuttall (2011) argued that cultural competencies should be included in WPL programs to acknowledge the knowledge, language and culture needs of NESB students. However, it is important to emphasise that recommendations for UR student groups equally apply to all students that promote: student goal-setting, self-care and self-initiated coping strategies (Nolan, Gleenson, Treanor, & Madigan, 2014); and peer review and critical friendships with fellow students throughout the WPL process (McCluskey, 2012).

Overwhelmingly, positive relationships with WPL academics and professional placement liaisons staff[1] are essential. Such relationships need to: encourage the use of available support services and personal networks and provide informal professional networking opportunities (McCluskey, 2012); present positive yet humanly fallible role models for learning (Riddick, 2003); and align WPL academics'[2] and WPL educators'[3] understandings and include diverse student needs (Myles, Cheng, & Wang, 2006).

CSU and UR student group enrolments

Table 1 represents 'equity' groupings for all higher education institutions (Australian Government Department of Education, 2014). It indicates that in comparison to other higher education institutions CSU has an above average representation of students from the 'equity' groups identified as regional, remote, Indigenous, and low SES, and is comparable with other institutions in relation to students with a disability.

Table 1: A Snapshot of 2013 Department of Higher Education Enrolment Data

Institution	NESB Students	Students with a disability	Women in Non-Traditional Area	ATSI	Low SES	Regional	Remote	All Domestic Undergraduate Students
Charles Sturt University	**1.5%**	**4.2%**	**13.1%**	**3.0%**	**24.2%**	**50.0%**	**1.5%**	**23,380**
2013 Total	3.3%	5.4%	17.3%	1.4%	16.3%	20.2%	0.8%	717,683

What is happening in WPL for CSU's UR student groups?

Our study explored the experiences of UR students and WPL academics by targeting WPL subjects at CSU with high UR student enrolments. It offers some emerging findings. Table 2 uses enrolment data to indicate representation of CSU students for all WPL coded subjects across all four CSU faculties. Data also shows representation in targeted WPL subjects for the empirical study such as: females in non-traditional areas of study (e.g. policing (40%), computing (21%), agriculture (22%)), and NESB students (35%) in accounting, low SES students (53%) in health, and ATSI students (100%) in Indigenous health studies. Voluntary participation across targeted WPL subjects came from 16 WPL academics located across the four CSU faculties,

and four mature age students with further UR as: two as first in family, two as regional, one as NESB, and one as low SES.

UR students in our study demonstrated an acute awareness of the specific challenges faced in the workplace, using these experiences to strengthen their resilience. Their own life experiences allowed them to empathise with clients in the workplace and grow in professional confidence through WPL – *"understanding and empathy helps me a lot ... I hope I never lose that"* STU01. One UR student in our study felt others doubted her ability and described the prejudices against her as *"culturally hostile"* due to her NESB, in which *"they question or doubt my ability ... but later on they would be convinced"* STU03.

Table 2: A Snapshot of 2013 CSU WPL Coded Subjects and Empirical Study Targeted Subjects

Faculty	School	Total Enrol	1st in family	Remote & Regional	Low SES	ATSI	NESB	Disability	Female	Mature Age Entry	Profession Exp or HE Quals
Arts	School of Communication and Creative Industries	209	15%	1%	1%	0%	0%	2%	11%	4%	22%
Arts	School of Humanities and Social Sciences	315	51%	29%	29%	4%	1%	10%	86%	6%	84%
Arts	School of Policing Studies	25	56%	20%	32%	0%	0%	0%	40%	12%	48%
Business	School of Accounting and Finance	176	41%	19%	14%	1%	35%	2%	53%	11%	71%
Business	School of Computing and Mathematics	19	42%	47%	21%	5%	0%	5%	21%	0%	89%
Business	School of Management and Marketing	691	42%	14%	13%	3%	26%	2%	54%	6%	73%
Education	School of Education; School of Teacher Education	655	78%	42%	30%	4%	0%	2%	84%	41%	47%
Science	School of Agriculture and Wine Sciences	18	78%	56%	44%	0%	0%	0%	22%	22%	33%
Science	School of Animal and Veterinary Sciences	470	8%	35%	20%	0%	0%	7%	77%	5%	87%
Science	School of Community Health	32	88%	34%	53%	3%	0%	0%	81%	34%	28%
Science	School of Dentistry and Health Sciences	199	78%	39%	35%	2%	7%	2%	69%	33%	35%
Science	School of Environmental Sciences	69	54%	23%	23%	6%	0%	6%	52%	16%	65%
Science	School of Human Movement Studies	44	66%	32%	18%	9%	0%	0%	34%	23%	52%
Science	School of Nursing, Midwifery and Indigenous Health	130	48%	44%	40%	100%	0%	15%	58%	0%	94%
	Empirical Study Targeted Subjects Total	3052	47%	28%	22%	7%	9%	4%	65%	16%	64%
	CSU WPL Coded Subjects Total	12848	58%	27%	25%	4%	5%	4%	72%	20%	64%

Colour Coding: Purple 85-100%; Red 75-85%; Green 50-75%; Yellow 30-50% Note: Subject level statistics may include some duplication of student numbers.

The UR students in our study sought and engaged with complex and challenging learning situations, often completing WPL projects after full-time work hours and utilising holidays and leave to meet the stipulated hours for placements: *"it was very, very difficult ... I got a HD and a D ... I was chuffed ... I got a promotion [then] bonus at work"* STU02. For WPL academics, it is important in planning placements to not lower expectations for UR students but to utilise an individual approach with each student that provides suitable challenges to enable effective, tailored learning. However, unnecessary added stress was experienced by the UR students in our study with short lead time for placement notification, and excessive workload and timing commitments – *"really emotionally and mentally draining and stressful"* STU04.

WPL academics in our study acknowledged the unique needs of UR student groups but also recognised that an individual learning process must be taken into account for all students. This is indicative of the flexible and individual approaches advocated as an incremental pedagogy for WPL (Sexton, 2011). All the UR students and WPL Academics in our study felt that it was vitally important to establish and maintain good relationship dynamics between themselves and placement liaison staff and WPL Educators in order to achieve positive and productive WPL experiences.

Significantly, the experiences of UR students and WPL academics in our study highlight strategies and relationships that promote celebration of difference rather than as deficit. These findings align well with those of Nuttall and Ortlipp (2012).

What are good WPL practices for UR students?

The suggestions that follow relate to the complex relationships for WPL between the student and the WPL Academic and Professional Placement Liaisons. This is by no means an exhaustive list. The section below provides recommended good WPL practices for UR student groups based on the findings from our local empirical study and pertinent literature that focus on shared responsibilities and

interdependent relationships for promoting productive WPL experiences and practices.

Recommendations

We conclude with the following recommended WPL practices for UR student groups.

A) Preparation Before Placement

1. Align individual needs of students with the WPL Educator and placement organisation – critical starting point!
2. Ensure lead time in placement notification enable students to:
   - Write goals and expectations for placement in their professional learning portfolio/CV; align to professional competencies as well as complex learning scenarios
   - Apply for scholarships and funding suitable to their situation
   - Submit a letter of introduction/job application to WPL Educator outlining their personal strengths and professional expectations and contributions for the placement position
   - Disclose individual student requirements as needed to the appropriate support units e.g. disability support services, and Professional Placement Liaisons e.g. to establish necessary adjustments guided with the required privacy regulations
   - Action research on placement organisation – Student conducts a pilot site visit (in-person or online), locates maps and information specific to their needs
   - Prepare their professional 'toolkit' for placement – attire, documentation, digital or computer device, specialised individual requirements, contact details to remain well-connected with their support networks during placement
   - Notify information from above and their placement details as appropriate to their support networks (personal relationships, student peers, university support units), Professional Placement Liaisons and WPL academics.

3. Highlight the need for self-care whilst on placement such as attending mental health first aid training
4. Inform students on disclosure, privacy regulations and implications for placement. Encourage students to prepare professionally i.e. support units, necessary adjustments
5. Conduct a meeting (in person or online) with WPL Educator to review placement documentation and requirements in line with specific position and student needs, and to prepare for the teaching and learning requirements of a WPL placement.

B) Support During Placement

1. Troubleshooting – stay informed and act on first signs of issues related to WPL and broader e.g. discrimination on gender, race
2. Clearly stipulate what is regarded as formative feedback and final assessment with the Student and the WPL Educator
3. Conduct 'milestone' meetings with Student to address any issues regarding the placement position and to review the feedback they receive within a progressive review process
4. Clarify the learning challenges that students experience in the workplace so that these can be recognised, acknowledged, discussed, clarified, remediated, and positively actioned
5. Conduct 'milestone' meetings with WPL Educator to ensure that the Student is mentored by one responsible WPL Educator throughout the entire placement and to ensure students are immersed in learning beyond competencies i.e. team work, communication and people skills of the profession
6. Encourage students stay in contact with their support networks

C) Consolidation After Placement

1. Create collective, dialogic and reflexive spaces for WPL students to make critical meaning of their WPL experiences e.g. Students review goals, lessons learnt and expectations for placement in digital professional learning portfolio/CV; acknowledge achievement of professional competencies and complex learning situations; share information on professional networks
2. Create opportunities and resources to share WPL experiences with students in the courses and faculties that you work e.g. invite students to create digital testimonial or be guest speakers; create an anonymous online forum for students to connect
3. Provide comprehensive feedback to WPL educators and plan next placement e.g. review documentation and processes for specific industry partner organisation structures and people
4. Update relevant CSU systems (e.g. InPlace) for tracking WPL experiences and particular placement characteristics e.g. record professional review notes and pertinent idiosyncrasies for placing Students with specific organisation and WPL Education
5. Review and share professional development resources as part of your continual improvement process e.g. discuss recent WPL experiences with other staff including cross faculty to hone the placement experiences for your WPL subject

Notes

[1] Professional placement liaison personnel is a generic term used to identify workplace teachers and supervisors employed by CSU
[2] WPL academic refers to staff employed by the university who organise WPL education components of courses.
[3] WPL Educator is a generic term used to identify workplace teachers and supervisors employed by industry and responsible for the learning aspects of student placements

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Further resources

Refer to the CSU WPL Policy. The EFPI website has webpages dedicated to workplace learning and resources including exemplars, occasional papers and audio-visual think pieces.

Resources to address Indigenous Australian Cultural Competence: http://www.csu.edu.au/division/landt/indigenous-curriculum/home; http://www.indigenousculturalcompetency.edu.au/index.html; http://www.hwa.gov.au/resources/publications - Findings from National Consultation Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Curriculum Framework; Developing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Capabilities in health graduates; Environmental scan of entry level health curricula, accreditation and professional competency standards.

Refer to Student Support Services to contact Student Liaison Officers specialising in disability, scholarships and grants and financial support.
Linking theory to practice: Pedagogies for professional practice graduate learning outcomes (GLOs)