

International Students' Perceptions of Workplace Experiences in Australian study programs: A Large-Scale Survey

Abstract

Across the globe there are increased numbers of students undertaking university level study in foreign countries. Many of the programs they enrol in, include a workplace experience (also known as work integrated learning, internship and/or practicum). The Work Placement for International Student Programs (WISP) project was conducted across Australia and aimed to identify current practices related to international students' workplace experiences as well as develop resources to improve these experiences overall. This paper focuses on a large-scale survey distributed to international students (n=252) throughout Australia to explore their perception of their experience whilst on their required placement. Results showed that students rated their overall workplace experience highly however, their confidence in completing assessment items where reflection and self-evaluation were required was a concern. Students also rated their self-perception of employability as uncertain despite having positive experiences in the workplace context. Findings showed that there is a need for universities to better support international students in completing reflective and self-evaluative assessment. In addition, more work needs to be done to improve confidence levels of international students around employability.

Keywords: international students, work placement, work integrated learning, practicum, employability, reflection, self-evaluation, large scale survey

INTRODUCTION

With an increase in international students enrolling in universities across Australia and the globe, as well as a reported interest in workplace experience, career advice and employability (Garrett, 2014) it is important that the higher education sector is able to provide positive experiences for international students (AUTHORS, 2015). The research literature shows strong evidence of issues and concerns that international students face during the work placements within their study programs (AUTHORS, 2015; Brown, 2008; Spooner-Lane, Tangen & Campbell, 2009). However, limited discourse exists on whether or not international students have positive experiences during their work placement. Further, it is unknown as to the extent international students believe their work placement met their own expectations in relation to assessment and employability.

With many universities in Australia developing Internationalisation and Employability policies and frameworks, investigating the work placement component of study programs in a range of disciplinary areas was necessary to improve the international student experience (AUTHORS, 2017). This paper therefore shares data from a large scale survey that was distributed across Australia to international students who had undertaken a work placement as part of their study program. The survey was developed as a result of both a comprehensive literature review as well as preliminary findings from a federally funded project in Australia known as the Work Placement for International Student Programs or WISP project.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International students in higher education

Internationalisation and enrolment of international students in higher degree institutions in Australia has increased remarkably over the past decade; indeed, over 440 000 international students enrolled in Australian universities in 2016 alone (Australian Government, 2016; DEEWR, 2009-2016). Previous research on international students has acknowledges the many challenges these students may face when undertaking study in another country (Kosmützky & Putty, 2016; Qing, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2010; Spooner-Lane, Tangen, & Campbell, 2009). In addition, there can be additional challenges related to the work placement (practicum, field experience, work integrated learning [WIL]), components of study (AUTHORS, in press/2017; Tangen, Mercer, Spooner-Lane, & Hepple, 2011). It is important to note, however, that international students experience their study, their work placement and even their time away from home differently and many experience success (AUTHORS, 2015). Both Carroll and Ryan (2005) and more recently Jones (2017) noted that students identified as ‘international’ are actually a diverse group and it is important to consider their educational mobility, pedagogic variation, and their differences in English

proficiency. Similarly, others have highlighted how much research related to international students tends to be about the problems or issues rather than what is working well (AUTHORS). It is therefore also important to explore what the positive aspects are of international exchanges so that the discourse is not always from a deficit point of view (Shafaei, Razak & Nejati, 2016). Understanding that individual international students have distinct needs, in particular during work placement components of study, is not prolific in the literature (AUTHORS). Without this knowledge, higher education institutions are at risk of losing a rich part of their culture and student body (Wilkins & Huisman, 2013).

International students and workplace experiences

The research literature acknowledges that there are a number of challenges and issues that international students face during their work placements when in unfamiliar surroundings. These include factors such as: language difficulties, homesickness, lack of understanding of the cultural and professional context, differences in approaches to discipline learning, and difficulties with their supervisors (AUTHOR; Brown, 2008; Campbell & Uusimaki, 2006; Facchinetti, 2010; Spooner-Lane et al., 2009). Further, international students' wellbeing and personal support networks tend to be impacted on while they are away from family and friends (Cho & Yu, 2015) and there is strong evidence to suggest that higher education contexts still need to improve their approaches to internationalisation including how they support international students; a major income stream for universities (Green & Whitsed, 2013). There is limited literature and evidence-based research however, that explores successful strategies related to work placements as well as positive and strengths-based approaches to international student experiences before, during and after work placement (Bilsland, Nagy & Smith, 2014). An exception is Bilsland, Nagy and Smith's (2014) study that investigated how work placement was included as a key component of a transnational education program aimed to improve employability of international students.

The project involved an Australian university and a Vietnamese partner; offering formative opportunities to acquire and practise work place skills prior to starting an internship. Findings suggested that employers appreciated this approach as it built stronger relationships with the industry and improved communication between partners overall.

Generally though, the research suggests that international students still feel their needs are unmet particularly in relation to work placements across various disciplines (AUTHORS, 2017). As such, initial findings from the above projects and the research literature (AUTHORS, 2017; Brown, 2008; Campbell & Uusimaki, 2006) indicated a need for a model of effective practice that can be flexible enough to be applied across faculties, universities and workplace contexts. Without such a model, practices may continue without further improvement to international students' experiences and outcomes within the work placement component of programs.

Background to the study

The WISP project was a federally funded project by the Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) in Australia¹. The project comprised several data gathering phases including both qualitative data (e.g. interviews, focus groups) and quantitative data (e.g. large scale survey, report analysis). This paper presents data findings from a large-scale survey distributed to international students across Australia.

METHOD

Procedure and Sample

As part of the WISP project on improving work-placement experiences for international students, the online survey using the LimeSurvey tool was made available to

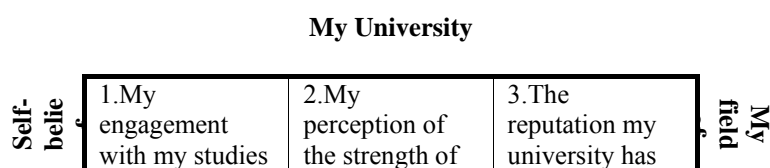
¹ The views expressed in this paper are not necessarily endorsed by the OLT.

international students who were undertaking / had recently completed their undergraduate studies which included a required work placement component. The survey was distributed to cohorts of international students across Australia between March and July 2016. Participants were assured that their responses were confidential. Two hundred and fifty two participants completed the survey. Background demographics of the participants were reported and discussed in the results.

Instrument

The present study sought to understand international students' experience during work placements through their course of study in Australia. It aimed to explore international students' feelings about the effectiveness of the work placement including preparation for work placement at university, as well as levels of confidence in relation to capacities during the work placement. To address these research aims, a survey was developed that incorporated many of the elements from the undergraduate students' study and its work placement components.

A four-part questionnaire was developed using the employability scale developed by Rothwell, Herbert and Rothwell (2008) and work placement attitudinal scale developed from the work of Ross and Elechi (2002) (see appendix). The employability scale was based on the four-sided model, provided in Figure 1, with 16 scale items representing either the primary influence of each of the four components (the university, the field of study, the state of the external labour market, and self-belief) of the model, or the interaction of the two adjacent components (Rothwell et al., 2008).



and academic performance	the university's brand	within my field of study
8. My confidence in my skills and abilities	My ambition	4. The status and credibility of my field of study
7. My awareness of opportunities in the external labour market	6. My perception of the state of the external labour market	5. The external labour market's demand for people in my subject field

The state of the external labour market

Figure 1. Student self-perceived employability matrix (Rothwell et al., 2008, p. 3)

The attitudinal scale consisted of 18 statement items on student workplace experiences formulated from the questions asked in the questionnaire by Ross and Elechi (2002). The two scales, which were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 (1=*Strongly Agree*, 2=*Agree*, 3=*Uncertain*, 4=*Disagree*, and 5=*Strongly Disagree*), from Sections Two and Three of the survey. Closed questions included the selection of a range of options in Section One seeking participants' demographic background information. Section Four was comprised of four questions opened to further comments on several features occurring at workplaces including personal experiences, context, impact factors, and hindrances.

Data analysis

Descriptive analysis was undertaken using SPSS version 24. The responses to background demographics were summarised to provide an overview of the participants' characteristics followed by a summary of their views on self-perceived employability and experiences in workplaces in Australia. To ascertain the consistency in response patterns across the 34 in two scales, a Reliability analysis was undertaken and yielded a high Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = .957$), indicating very strong consistency in responses across items. Reliability tests were also undertaken across items in each scale in the survey, resulting in similar high Cronbach's alphas ($\alpha > .9$), suggesting very good consistency in responses across items in each scale. The above mentioned preliminary analyses were performed to

ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity for the correlation between self-perceived employability and workplace experiences to be examined.

RESULTS

Participants' background demographics

Overall 252 international students participated in this study. Table 1 summarises key demographic features of the participants, including details of their gender, age groupings, and ethnicity, and whether English is their first language. The participants' reported age groupings were well distributed with predominance of those at school leaving age (24.6%) through to mid-twenties (53.6%). This presentation across age groupings likely captures participation in higher education for initial occupational preparation and the age of the international student.

Table 1

Background and demographic characteristics of the participants

Variables	Values	N	%
Age	17-20	62	24.6
	21-25	135	53.6
	26-30	40	15.9
	31-35	9	3.6
	36-40	4	1.6
	41-50	1	.4
	>50	1	.4
Gender	Female	150	60.0
	Male	99	39.6
	Not specified	1	.4
Ethnicity	Hispanic	2	.8
	Asian	180	71.4
	South Asian	15	6.0
	Indian	18	7.1
	African	5	2.0
	European	6	2.4
	Eastern European	2	.8
	Middle Eastern	5	2.0
	Other	19	7.5
English as first language	Yes	54	21.8
	No	194	78.2

Asian ethnic background is overwhelmingly represented among the international student groups, accounting for 71.4% (n=180). This is not surprising given that the highest

percentage of international students in Australia come from China (Australian Education International, Dec. 2016).

Educational background and current study

In addition to general demographic information, the participants were asked to report on their educational background and their current study in Australian institutions. Table 2 provides details of the information acquired.

Table 2

Educational background and current study of the participants

Variables	Values	N	%
Qualification	High school	45	18.0
	Grad Cert/Dip	38	15.2
	Bachelor degree	121	48.4
	Masters	46	18.4
	Doctorate	0	0.0
Disciplines	Science	23	9.1
	Medicine	5	2.0
	Nursing	18	7.1
	Engineering	46	18.3
	Psychology	1	.4
	Education	60	23.8
	Linguistics/Applied Linguistics	1	.4
	TESOL	1	.4
	Business	32	12.7
	Tourism/Hospitality	6	2.4
	Economics	6	2.4
	Finance	17	6.7
	Accounting	32	12.7
	Banking	1	.4
	Other	27	10.8
Year of study	1 st year 1 st semester	67	26.6
	1 st year 2 nd semester	24	9.5
	2 nd year 1 st semester	46	18.3
	2 nd year 2 nd semester	26	10.3
	3 rd year 1 st semester	24	9.5
	3 rd year 2 nd semester	24	9.5
	4 th year 1 st semester	11	4.4
	4 th year 2 nd semester	10	4.0
	Other	20	7.9

Half of the participants (48.4%) obtained bachelor degrees across different disciplines. They are at various stages of their current study with 26.6% on their first semester of their first year, followed by 18.3% on their 2nd year 1st semester. The majority of participants (64.7%) were in their first half, i.e. first and second year, of their undergraduate

studies. This suggests they would mostly have reported their commencing experiences with work placements. Additional information is provided below giving more detailed profiles of the general work placements of these participants.

General work placements

Information with regard to placement types, length of the placements, and assessment tasks required in those placements were elicited from the participants, which are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3

Characteristics of the work placements undertaken by the participants

Variables	Values	N	%
Placement type	Government department	8	3.2
	School	88	34.9
	Hospital	20	7.9
	Clinical setting	8	3.2
	Small/Med private	49	19.4
	Large corporate	32	12.7
	Bank	3	1.2
	Other	44	17.5
Length of placement	10-20 hours	29	13.8
	20-50 hours	32	15.2
	50-100 hours	14	6.7
	>100 hours	14	6.7
	1 week	8	3.8
	2 weeks	18	8.6
	3 weeks	29	13.8
	4 weeks	9	4.3
	5 weeks	7	3.3
	6 weeks or above	50	23.8

The length of placements varied across disciplines. Of the 210 who responded to the question regarding the length of their placement, 50 indicated their placement of 6 weeks or above, accounting for the largest reported number (23.8%), followed by 15.2% of the participants having shorter placement periods of 20 to 50 hours. The longer placements likely represent the cohort of students doing teaching practicums in school settings.

Each placement involved more than one assessment task. The three most common assessment tasks used in these placements were observations (47.6%), practical tasks

(45.2%), and reflections (43.3%). Figure 2 provides a visual presentation of the frequency of those assessment tasks.

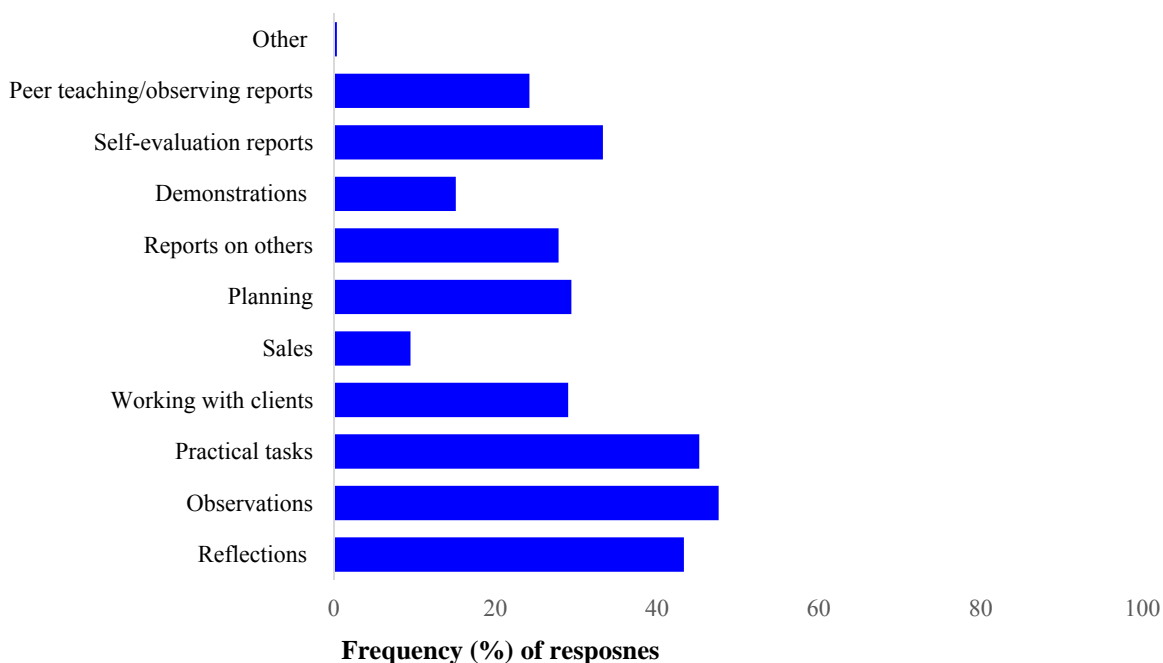


Figure 2. Results of reported assessment types undertaken by the participants

Self-perceived employability

In order to examine the levels of confidence in relation to capacities during work placements, participants were asked to respond to 16 statements relating to their perceptions of four components, i.e. (i) their university's reputation, (ii) their field of study, (iii) the state of the external labour market, and (iv) self-belief of one's skills and abilities (Rothwell et al., 2008).

Descriptive and frequency statistics are presented in Table 4. Although only three items, i.e. item 5 ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 0.87$), item 12 ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 0.95$), and item 13 ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 0.93$), had the means either equal to or higher than the mid-point, modest scores found for all items (mean > 2) suggest the surveyed students were not very positive but uncertain about their employability, evidenced by high percentages of uncertain responses in

most items (>25%). This moderate level of uncertainty of the surveyed students' self-perception of employability has important implications for improving international students' confidence in their work readiness.

Table 4

Results of responses to attitude statements on self-perceived employability

#	Statements on employability	n	% of responses					Mean	Std. Dev
			SA	A	U	D	SD		
1	I achieve high grades in relation to my studies.	250	10.8	56.8	23.6	6.4	2.4	2.33	.843
2	I regard my academic work as top priority.	251	21.5	61.0	11.6	4.0	2.0	2.04	.819
3	Employers are eager to employ graduates from my university.	242	13.2	40.9	38.4	6.2	1.2	2.41	.842
4	The status of this university is a significant asset to me in job seeking.	251	17.1	56.6	19.9	5.6	.8	2.16	.801
5	Employers specifically target this university in order to recruit individuals from my subject area(s).	245	11.8	35.1	43.7	7.8	1.6	2.52	.862
6	My university has an outstanding reputation in my field(s) of study.	250	20.0	49.6	26.0	3.6	.8	2.16	.809
7	A lot more people apply for my degree than there are places available.	246	11.0	41.5	37.4	7.7	2.4	2.49	.879
8	My chosen subject(s) rank(s) highly in terms of social status.	248	12.5	44.8	31.9	9.3	1.6	2.43	.883
9	People in the career I am aiming for are in high demand in the external labour market.	251	19.1	50.6	25.9	4.0	.4	2.16	.789
10	My degree is seen as leading to a specific career that is generally perceived as highly desirable.	249	21.7	53.0	18.1	5.2	2.0	2.13	.880
11	There is generally a strong demand for graduates at the present time.	248	14.9	47.6	27.0	8.9	1.6	2.35	.896
12	There are plenty of job vacancies in the geographical area where I am looking.	250	9.6	34.8	40.4	10.8	4.4	2.66	.949
13	I can easily find out about opportunities in my chosen field.	248	10.5	45.6	29.8	11.3	2.8	2.50	.926
14	The skills and abilities that I possess are what employers are looking for.	248	13.7	58.5	24.2	2.4	1.2	2.19	.742
15	I am generally confident of success in job Interviews and selection events.	251	14.3	51.0	26.7	7.2	.8	2.29	.829
16	I feel I could get any job so long as my skills and experience are reasonably relevant.	251	18.7	54.2	18.3	7.2	1.6	2.19	.877

Legend: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Uncertain (U), Disagree (D), Strongly Disagree (SD)

Attitudes towards workplaces in Australia

The main objective of the survey was to seek international student's perceptions of the effectiveness of their work placement including the preparation for the placement at universities in Australia. The students were asked to appraise their work placement experiences via various attitudinal assessments of these experiences.

Descriptive and frequency statistics on the items on this scale were presented in Table 5. The results show that the students generally had positive experiences during their work placements with mean scores ranging from 1.92 to 2.23. The lowest mean scores, suggested strong positive attitudes, were yielded for item 3 'The internship experience has improved my understanding of the field of my study' ($M = 1.92, SD = 0.73$) and item 10 'I understood the placement environment' ($M = 1.92, SD = 0.67$).

Table 5

Results of responses to attitude statements on internship experiences

#	Statements on workplace experiences	n	% of responses					Mean	Std. Dev
			SA	A	U	D	SD		
1	The assignments given to me by the workplace met my expectations.	251	13.9	58.6	20.7	6.0	.8	2.21	.784
2	In general, I was treated as an employee of the workplace.	252	13.1	60.3	18.3	7.1	1.2	2.23	.810
3	The internship experience has improved my understanding of the field of my study.	250	27.6	55.6	14.4	2.0	.4	1.92	.729
4	My field supervisor took an active interest in my progress during the internship.	249	21.3	50.6	22.5	4.4	1.2	2.14	.841
5	My supervisor listened to me and my suggestions.	250	24.0	46.8	24.4	3.6	1.2	2.11	.852
6	I felt accepted and valued in my placement.	246	21.1	56.5	17.5	3.3	1.6	2.08	.812
7	I was well supported by my university when I had questions.	248	20.6	52.8	18.5	6.5	1.6	2.16	.879
8	My cultural strengths were valued in my placement.	250	16.8	56.0	19.6	5.2	2.4	2.20	.866
9	I was encouraged and supported to frequently reflect on my practice whilst on placement.	251	20.7	54.6	21.1	2.0	1.6	2.09	.797
10	I understood the placement environment.	251	23.9	62.9	11.2	1.6	.4	1.92	.667
11	Overall, I was assigned to tasks that were appropriate for this placement.	252	18.7	63.1	14.3	2.8	1.2	2.05	.740
12	The review/reflection sessions improved my understanding of the field.	250	20.4	61.2	16.4	1.6	.4	2.00	.685
13	If I had the opportunity, I would accept assignment to this workplace again.	251	24.3	47.8	21.5	3.6	2.8	2.13	.916
14	The internship fulfilled my expectations.	248	22.2	50.4	21.4	4.4	1.6	2.13	.863
15	The field supervisor met his/her obligations to assist me.	249	20.5	57.8	16.5	2.4	2.8	2.09	.845
16	I was able to interact with other students when undertaking my placement.	250	19.6	58.4	12.8	6.8	2.4	2.14	.892
17	The degree program I am undertaking and its curriculum adequately prepares me for this internship.	246	19.9	56.5	18.3	3.7	1.6	2.11	.816
18	I was provided opportunities to suggest ways for improvement or change aspects of my placement.	245	19.6	53.5	20.0	5.7	1.2	2.16	.845

Correlation: Relationship between self-perceived employability and workplace experiences

The relationship between self-perceived employability (as measured by the employability scale) and perceptions towards work placements in Australian workplaces (as measured by the attitudinal work placement scale) was investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient with results provided in Table 6.

Table 6

Correlation between measures of employability and workplace attitudes

	Perceived employability	Perceived work placements
Perceived employability	1	.70***
Perceived work placements	203	1

*Note: *** denotes $p < .001$*

Correlation results indicate that there was a strong, positive correlation between the two variables, $r = .70$, $n = 203$, $p < .001$, with positive levels of self-perceived employability associated with positive levels of perceived workplace environments. The more positive the participants perceive their employability skills, the more positive they feel about workplace experiences and/or vice versus.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results from this survey, a component of the larger study, have provided strong evidence that international students generally have positive experiences during their work placements in the Australian context. This is contradictory to much literature on international students' experience in higher education in general but also related to work placement experiences.

The survey first explored students' demographical information showing over 75% of students have English as an additional or second language. Most of the students were from Asia, over 70% and were in their first or second year of study in an Australian university. The

survey then investigated students' self-perception and attitudes towards employability based on Rothwell et al's (2008) and Ross and Elechi's (2002) work. Even though students largely indicated a positive experience during their work placements they were uncertain about their transition into employment. This has implications for improving international students' study experiences and their own confidence levels related to work readiness and employment. It is uncertain however, as to whether this view pertained solely to finding work outside of the international students' own home country or within Australia itself. Of course, visa concerns may contribute to this if within Australia.

Another major finding that is critical for higher educators to consider, is the fact that students from predominantly ESL/EFL backgrounds found assessment tasks that required reflection and/or self-evaluation difficult. It would therefore be important for university staff across a range of courses to be aware of the fact that they need to teach explicit skills in the areas of reflection and self-evaluation, in particular prior to international students attending work placements. The WISP project utilised the 4Rs model (Ryan & Ryan, 2011) in terms of effective reflection when set as an assessment task about an activity. Self-evaluation tasks however, were not explored as the students interviewed did not indicate this as an area of concern. It would therefore be recommended that higher education contexts embed learning activities that support international students in reflecting on their own capacities and competencies related to work placements.

Limitations related to this part of the study include the fact that the survey was distributed in the first instance by team members of the WISP project. Four members of this team worked in the area of education and therefore many of the participants were from education. However, education does tend to have larger cohorts of international students in universities in Australia. Also we are unsure as to whether or not there were many students

from regional parts of Australia which could result in different outcomes related to workplace experiences given limited resourcing and contact with family and friends.

Given that international students in higher education are listed as the third highest export to iron ore and coal (Blakkarly, 2017) in Australia it is critical that such institutions develop more robust and effective processes related to work experience and placements for international students. Without a thoughtful overhaul and enhancement of these practices students may a. choose other countries to study, b. have limited pathways after their study, due to poorly perceived employability skills and competencies and c. be viewed as purely an economic advantage rather than needing effective learning and teaching experiences.

Learning how to socialise into a chosen profession effectively is critical for success post-university life. If higher education contexts can support this transition further then the international students' experiences will be more positive and successful intercultural exchanges will result.

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APPENDIX

SURVEY INSTRUMENT**Section 1: DEMOGRAPHICS (Multiple choice questions)**

1. Age
2. Gender
3. Ethnicity
4. English as first language
5. Highest qualification
6. Discipline of current study
7. Year of study
8. Type of work placement
9. Length of work placement (number of hours or weeks)
10. What types of assessment or documentation did you have to complete as part of your work placement?
11. Would you please rate the work placement in Australia on a scale 1-10 (1 being the worst and 10 the best)?

Section 2: SELF-PERCEIVED EMPLOYABILITY (*A. Rothwell, Herbert, & Rothwell, 2007*) **(5-point Likert scale, Level of agreement: Strong Agree, Agree, Uncertain, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)**

1. I achieve high grades in relation to my studies.
2. I regard my academic work as top priority.
3. Employers are eager to employ graduates from my university.
4. The status of this university is a significant asset to me in job seeking.
5. Employers specifically target this university in order to recruit individuals from my subject area(s).
6. My university has an outstanding reputation in my field(s) of study.
7. A lot more people apply for my degree than there are places available.
8. My chosen subject(s) rank(s) highly in terms of social status.
9. People in the career I am aiming for are in high demand in the external labour market.
10. My degree is seen as leading to a specific career that is generally perceived as highly desirable.
11. There is generally a strong demand for graduates at the present time.
12. There are plenty of job vacancies in the geographical area where I am looking.
13. I can easily find out about opportunities in my chosen field.
14. The skills and abilities that I possess are what employers are looking for.
15. I am generally confident of success in job Interviews and selection events.
16. I feel I could get any job so long as my skills and experience are reasonably relevant.

Section 3: ATTITUDES TOWARDS WORK PLACEMENTS (*Ross & Elechi, 2002*) (5-point Likert scale, Level of agreement: Strong Agree, Agree, Uncertain, Disagree, Strongly Disagree) (*Minor modifications of the wording have been done in this scale*)

1. The assignments given you by the workplace met your expectations.
2. In general, you were treated as an employee of the workplace.
3. The internship experience has improved my understanding of the field of my study.
4. My field supervisor took an active interest in my progress during the internship.
5. Over all, I was assigned to tasks that were appropriate for this placement.
6. The review sessions improved my understanding of the field.
7. If I had the opportunity, I would accept assignment to this workplace again.
8. The internship program is certainly worth continuing.
9. The internship fulfilled my expectations.
10. The field supervisor met his/her obligations to assist me.
11. The degree program I am undertaking and its curriculum adequately prepares me for this internship.
12. I would recommend this workplace to other students.

Section 4: COMMENTS

1. Can you give any examples of your personal experiences of work placements in Australia? Please provide them below.
2. Are there any other comments you would like to make regarding Australian workplaces? Please provide them below.