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Craig, AM 2014, Cultural and professional growth through a team based internship, in Proceedings of the Australian Collaborative Education Network National Conference ; ACEN 2014, Australian Collaborative Education Network (ACEN), Springvale South, Vic, pp. 94-98.

## Available from Deakin Research Online

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# Cultural and Professional Growth through a Team Based Internship

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In 2012, 26 students from Deakin University Australian were provided with the opportunity to undertake a two-week placement with businesses in Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia. In teams of four or five, the students immersed themselves in their organisations to solve a business problem. The program was conducted again in 2013 and plans are underway to conduct the program in 2014. This paper will describe the program and the way it operates. It will provide the learnings from the two iterations it has been conducted and detail what factors contribute to a successful experience. The paper will describe the outcomes and provide evidence of the program's success from both a student and business perspective.

Keywords: Teamwork, internship, cultural, placement, work integrated learning

## INTRODUCTION

The Faculty of Business and Law at Deakin University offers a growing number of work integrated learning (WIL) opportunities for its students. Undergraduate WIL units are offered across the faculty (and are also available to students from other faculties) through five different models:

- Community Based Volunteering
- Work Based Learning
- Business Internship Program
- Team Based Learning
- Industry Based Learning

Course-specific units are also offered for students undertaking degrees in Law or Sports Management. The above units are all similar in aims, but differ in terms of: focus; host organisation; duration and therefore attributed credit points; learning outcomes and whether it is an unpaid or paid work placement/project. The WIL units are designed to give students experience in an environment where they will develop work-ready attributes, contributing to their overall skill development in the application of academic learning. Each experience is designed to add value to the students' qualification and increase their employability. Employability means that students acquire the skills, knowledge and personal attributes that make them "more likely to secure employment and be successful in their chosen occupations to the benefits of themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy (Yorke as cited in Oliver 2013). It also provides the student with a genuine experience to include on their resume as well as the opportunity to identify future referees and to commence creating their professional networks.

All of the units include opportunities for students to undertake their placements in an overseas location. One such opportunity revolves around a team-based business internship conducted in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Participating students are enrolled in the Team Based Learning unit, which contributes one credit point towards their degree (a typical degree consists of 24 credit points). The program operates during the inter-trimester break in July. Utilising the services of a local agent in Kuala Lumpur, opportunities are sourced for students to work with a local business for a period of two weeks where they will complete a project or solve a business problem as a team. The aims of the program are for students to undertake an authentic business placement, as a member of a team, which will contribute to their personal development. The program helps students to develop the Deakin University Graduate Learning Outcomes of communication, self-management and teamwork skills.

## THE PROGRAM EXPERIENCE

Once the Malaysian program is advertised, second or third year students are able to submit an expression of interest and a written application (CV and a one pager on why they want to undertake a group internship overseas). Short-listed students are then invited for an interview and those who are

successful are required to undertake individual preparation for the trip; obtain a suitable passport, visa, finances, insurance and flights. Four weeks out from departure the selected students attend a compulsory pre-departure briefing. This is conducted in a business environment in central Melbourne and students attend in business attire.

The pre-departure briefing centres on the expectations and demands of undertaking the program. Cultural awareness, culture shock, health and safety issues are described and discussed. Students are then assigned into their teams and each has a team leader appointed by the academic staff in the program. The team leader's role is to keep their team on track, ensure there is good communication between the members, consider the team morale but at the same time avoid 'being too dominant'. Feedback from previous Hosts indicate that they value the teams being multi-disciplinary in nature. The team composition is therefore based around the building of diverse teams (age, gender, ethnicity and skill set) and the staff's knowledge of the project to which they will be assigned. Students are then given an opportunity to get to know each other and a number of team-building activities take place.

Apart from the Team leader there are three other roles which students elect to undertake for the team: sEcretariat, logistical Arranger, and Media organiser. Suggested responsibilities for each role are provided which have evolved through feedback and suggestions from previous participants of the program. However the team can choose to alter these to suit their needs. The role of the sEcretariat has included ensuring notes are kept of team meetings, confirming the project description accurately reflects the needs of the host, is clearly documented and understood by all. The Logistical Arranger coordinates activities such as that the team travels as a unit to and from the host's premises. They consider the team's needs regarding technology, office supplies, local sim card, and a kitty for team costs such as taxis. The role of the Media person has incorporated getting all members of the team enrolled in the program's Facebook page, coordinating at least one a blog article as well as a photographic record (20 photos) which best capture the team's activities.

Assessment comprises the Team's graded project (50%) and three graded individual tasks (50%). Reddan (2013) suggests that there are benefits for students if assessment items, which are valid, reliable and appropriate, are graded. A student's motivation, their sense of achievement and even their enjoyment will increase as they are likely to contribute greater effort than if the course was simply marked as either 'satisfactory' or 'un-satisfactory'. Williams and Bateman (2003) however warn that grading adds to the 'complexity of assessment'.

The first individual task revolves around research into teamwork, undertaking an analysis of their own strengths and weaknesses, and goal setting. During their time in Malaysia students keep an individual reflective learning diary to which minimal marks are assigned. Edgar, Francis-Coad and Connaughton (2013) suggest that it is challenging for educators to include "reflective practice skills into curricula that provide context, are assessable and assist students to develop the graduate attribute of reflective practice". Boud and Walker (1998) caution that asking students to submit their reflections is not without serious problems. While students are encouraged to make time at the end of each day to critically reflect about their experience of the Malaysian workplace they are asked to write about just one issue or item in their 'hand-in journal'. In this way we attempt to 'contain' the shared reflections to ones that students are comfortable submitting, be they of an emotional nature or otherwise. It is possible that students may experience culture shock, and this may emerge in these reflections, which gives the staff member an opportunity to help students deal with it.

The final individual piece is a post-placement report, which enables students to gather appropriate and contextualised practical examples of professional competencies that reflect their input and output of the experience. Students will also be able to draw upon their previous reflections and incorporate them into the report. The timing of these assessment items align with the pre, during and post strategy suggested by Cooper, Orrell and Bowden (2010).

## THE IN-COUNTRY INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCE

The academic staff member arrives in KL a few days before the students. This enables them to go and visit all of the host businesses, meet with the supervising staff member(s) and discuss the project and expectations.

Students travel independently from Australia though after the pre-departure briefing numerous students make connections and travel together. This gives students flexibility to choose the dates and fares that suit their circumstances. All students must be at the hotel by the Saturday evening prior to the two-week internship. Students are allocated to a twin share room with another student who is not in their team. A full day of orientation takes place on the Sunday. The morning orientation includes an entire group briefing on health and safety, the expectations and responsibilities of the students, networking and a reminder they are guests in another country. Individual team briefings then occur. A local lunch is followed by a great race around Kuala Lumpur, to enable students to orient themselves and see a little of the city, a welcome dinner concludes the day.

For the next two weeks teams make their own way to and from the host premises. They work on an authentic task or problem, and get real world practice in a foreign business environment. In the evening the staff member works with different students. Some nights it is entire teams, other nights it is all the members undertaking a particular role such as the team leaders or media people. An entire group meeting takes place on the first Friday evening where each team presents to the group their experiences of the first week and any issues they have encountered with their project. This enables other students to contribute suggestions or alternative ideas for those teams who need help to overcome their difficulties. On the middle Saturday students may be required to continue working if it is a normal working day for their host, may be invited to some staff activity or may have a rest day. Sunday is set aside for rest, reflection and recovery for all.

An alumni event has also been held one evening in the fortnight, which students attend. This gives the students an opportunity to network with business people working in Malaysia but who have attended the university students are currently studying at. This event is highly valued by the students as it enables them to get more insights into working in Malaysia. Students, in the past, have also had the opportunity to attend the Malaysian Australian Business Council networking function at the Australian High Commission. In the words from one student, "it was an invaluable experience being able to meet industry experts and Australian expats".

Towards the end of the second week students present their work to the host business and academic through a formal oral presentation and a written report in a format appropriate for the project task. The staff member then has an individual debriefing session with the business regarding their experience of the program.

The Internship experience concludes with a debriefing on the Friday evening for the entire group of students. By this time students have completed 80- 90 hours of work on average with their host organisation.

## THE OUTCOME

Some indicators of the positive student and host business experience are as follows:

- Students were asked on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being unsatisfactory and 10 being awesome, to rate the overall Malaysian internship experience. The average rating was 8.3 from the 46 students who have participated over the two years.
- Almost every host organisation with whom students have worked have asked to be involved again.

Indicative comments from students:

Undertaking an internship in Australia is a wonderful, challenging and knowledgeable experience in itself, but being able to undertake an internship in a foreign country opens one up to a magnitude of different experiences and learning curves.

As a group I believe we would all recommend undertaking an internship in Malaysia, as you get to actually use the skills you learn from uni and apply it to the work you do, it is a great opportunity to make new friends, experience a different cultures and aspects of the Malaysian working life and it will not only be beneficial to your learning but to your future.

It is easy for teachers and textbooks to tell us the differences exist, but to see the differences put all of this into perspective. Although it was often challenging, it was an amazing trip and one we would highly recommend to students looking to gain that little bit extra, interesting experience to add to their resume.

Regarding the teamwork aspect:

Having to work with 3 people that you knew very little about was difficult at first, but we were able to grow from the experience and all come together by the end, not only as good friends, but as a solid work group who had worked tirelessly to produce incredible work for our assigned company.

And from a mature age student:

The internship opportunity was a completely unexpected opportunity. As a single Mum of two teenagers, I thought it would be them who would be off travelling the world, not me. The experience of the Malaysia Internship far exceeds any classroom learning. It's exhilarating, exhausting and challenging all at the same time.

#### WHAT CONTRIBUTES TO THE PROGRAMS SUCCESS?

- Employing a local agent to organise the hosts and make all the local arrangements
- The academic visiting the host organisations prior to the student's arrival and clarifying details and expectations.
- The academic working with the students in the evening, rather than during business hours.
- Teams of four students exactly, and five teams make up the entire groupie 20 students in total.
- Students arranging their own flights/travel to and from Kuala Lumpur.
- All students staying at the same group hotel (no exceptions even those with local accommodation).
- Providing a detailed pre-departure program and a debriefing session after the placements conclude.
- Guided learning through assessment tasks.
- Providing suggested responsibilities for each role that needs to be undertaken in the team and allowing teams to modify as needed.
- Accommodation of students in twin share rooms with another student who is not in their team.

There are numerous opportunities under consideration to expand the program in the future including using alternative locations such as Penang or Singapore, or conducting a second offering of the program in another inter-trimester break.

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