Improving placement learning at scale: a case study evaluation

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Abstract

Purpose – In this study, the authors explore students' and industry's perceptions about the challenges and opportunities of participating in a large-scale, non-compulsory, individual, in-person and unpaid business placement programme at an Australian university. The placement programme aims to support students' workplace transition by emphasising the development of key employability skills through reflective learning and linking theory to practice.

Design/methodology/approach – Utilising a case study methodology and integrating survey questionnaires, the authors collected both quantitative and qualitative data with large sample sizes.

Findings – The results highlight curriculum areas for improvement, emphasising tailored feedback to manage placement expectations and addressing employability skill strengths and weaknesses.

Practical implications – Recommendations include co-partnering with students to develop short, tailored and hot tip videos along with online learning modules, including the presentation of evidence-based statistics to inform students about post-programme employment prospects.

Originality/value – The study contributes to benchmarking good practices in non-compulsory, individual, in-person and unpaid placement pedagogy within the business education context.

Keywords Work-integrated learning, Employability, Placements, Internships, Unpaid in-person placements, Preparation and post-placement learning

Paper type Case study

Introduction

The term work-integrated learning (WIL) serves as an overarching pedagogy label for various work-based learning models and delivery modes, all involving students, teachers and industry. These models encompass a purposefully designed curriculum linking theory to practice through reflective learning to enhance employability outcomes (Bracken *et al.*, 2022; Fergusson and van der Laan, 2021). WIL includes optional and compulsory paid and unpaid individual or group-based in-person and e-placements (i.e. internships/e-internships), along with experiential work-based learning and industry projects via in-person, virtual or simulated environments (Jeske and Linehan, 2020; Kaider *et al.*, 2017; Wong *et al.*, 2021; Zegwaard and Pretti, 2023). Such WIL experiences can occur locally, remotely or internationally and are often tailored to students' majors at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels for domestic and international students of higher education (Fergusson and van der Laan, 2021).

One of the most popular WIL types is individual, in-person placements that occur "within [the] curriculum . . . under the supervision of professionals" (Moore *et al.*, 2015, p. 242). This WIL model appears throughout the Australian higher education sector (Jackson, 2015), including internationally (Zegwaard and Pretti, 2023; Zegwaard and Rowe, 2019). However,

placement models are difficult to evaluate (Dean and Rook, 2023) and to upscale due to a number of challenges.

Some major issues include the difficulties in balancing the nexus between operational requirements and quality learning outcomes. For example, extensive resourcing is needed to secure students an individual placement with an appropriately matched host supervisor. Furthermore, placement learning also needs to "deeply embed . . . theories of learning from experience . . . [to] encourage the learner to develop a process of reflective action as originally proposed by Kolb's experiential learning model" (Fergusson and van der Laan, 2021, p. 302).

To further complicate matters, WIL researchers, educators and policy advocates argue for compulsory in-person and e-placements to become a part of business education to widen student access and enhance employability outcomes for all (Bracken *et al.*, 2022; Delis and Jones, 2023). However, business placements are not always compulsory nor an accreditation requirement, unlike engineering, teaching or nursing (Bracken *et al.*, 2022; Courtney-Pratt *et al.*, 2015; Cooper *et al.*, 2020). This particular WIL context can result in uncomfortable discourses surfacing between WIL advocators and business disciplinary staff when deciding upon the amount of WIL experiences to be allocated within a student's degree, especially when degree space is contested (Hains-Wesson *et al.*, 2021; Gribble *et al.*, 2015).

Consequently, the scaling up of non-compulsory business placement experiences remains an evolving phenomenon that requires creative thinking to solve (Ng and Burke, 2006; Hains-Wesson *et al.*, 2021). Otherwise, selective placement practices (Bracken *et al.*, 2022) will continue to disadvantage business students who come from low socio-economic, first-in-family backgrounds, including academically challenged students, international students and students from disadvantage and diverse backgrounds.

To assist with meeting this call to action, we present a practical case study that integrates a significant number of placement students' (N = 1,006) and host industry' (N = 240) perceptions and viewpoints. We utilise the findings to evaluate participants' placement experiences, assisting in reviewing a large-scale, non-compulsory, individual and in-person placement programme at a research-intensive business school in Australia. Although the study centres on one specific placement programme in an Australian university, the methodology and findings have wide implications in the domain of WIL pedagogy and practice across the higher education sector.

In the next section, we provide a brief outline of the study's context, focussing on key terms to assist with contextualising the exploration before providing the programme's key elements and design. We then follow with the methodology, methods, data collection and analysis sections. Subsequently, the result segment proceeds before providing a discussion and conclusion section, including five key recommendations. Finally, we outline the limitations and future areas of research.

Context of study

The term *placement* in higher education has evolved over time to encompass various forms, including internships and e-internships, co-operative education, in-person, online through virtual means (Wong *et al.*, 2021) and paid versus unpaid (Cohen and de Peuter, 2019), reflecting the changing landscape of learning through work and technological advancements (Jeske and Linehan, 2020). For instance, Williams *et al.* (2019) emphasise the interpersonal skill development fostered by in-person placements, citing face-to-face interactions and immediate feedback as instrumental factors in an effective placement experience. On the contrary, the flexibility offered by online placements, as noted by Pretti *et al.* (2020), allows students to engage in diverse global work environments, developing digital communication and remote collaboration skills. Furthermore, Cohen and de Peuter's (2019) systematic literature review highlights a shift in media rhetoric from normalising unpaid placements to portraying them as exploitative, unfair and illegal.

Subsequently, various debates about placement mode, form and type hinge on assumptions and context. Some scholars argue that unpaid interns perform productive work without compensation, violating labour laws (Cameron, 2018; Lloyd *et al.*, 2019). On the other hand, Hoskyn *et al.* (2020) posit that regardless of whether a placement is paid or unpaid, the main aim should be for students to receive a beneficial learning experience with clear learning outcomes and appropriate supervision. Additionally, the appropriate duration of students' placement time has also received criticism. Longer placements that span more than six months have shown increased improvement in communication, teamwork and problem-solving abilities (Beer and Mulder, 2020) compared to shorter placements that last a few weeks, offering intensive but limited professional skill development and industry exposure (Brown *et al.*, 2019).

Overall, the literature on placement type, form and mode is dynamic, with decisions on which model to implement shaped by a country's labour context, university and government employability strategies, resource availability and technological advancements. In this study, we concentrate on individual and in-person unpaid placements that "provide opportunities for students to work on skills and projects which are relevant to them . . . bridging academic and professional practice and identify areas of convergence" (Miller and Konstantinou, 2022, p. 4). It is important to note that this type of placement model reflects the country's labour context, employability strategies and resource limitations at the university where this study took place.

We also position that a placement is a type of WIL curriculum that includes the teaching and assessment of key employability skills and behaviours through reflective learning, helping to focus students to prepare and transition into the workplace as life-long learners (Daubney, 2021; Graham, 2017; Jackson, 2015; Zegwaard and Rowe, 2019). Thus, the term employability skills is integral to placement pedagogy as they align with industry expectations for graduates.

These skills encompass creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, metacognition, communication, collaboration, information and technology literacy, global citizenship and social responsibility, amongst others (Kaider *et al.*, 2017; Zegwaard and Pretti, 2023). Further, employability skills are often considered non-technical skills and behaviours that change over time, such as a positive mindset and innovation (Hains-Wesson and Ji, 2020a). Despite the benefits of teaching and assessing employability skills through placement pedagogy, which is increasingly crucial to meet the demands of the future of work, it can be challenging, especially when students are geographically dispersed.

For example, complications around managing placements arise when individual or group-based placements occur across different locations via diverse modes and time zones, requiring extensive coordination between industry supervisors, students and university WIL teams (Wong *et al.*, 2021; Jeske and Linehan, 2020; Brewer *et al.*, 2020; Zegwaard and Rowe, 2019). These challenges intensify when students may not be placement-ready, creating risks around university branding and/or the workplace experience itself (Jeske and Linehan, 2020; Odlin *et al.*, 2022; Zegwaard and Pretti, 2023).

In light of the many challenges as well as the limited research on placement preparation and post-learning in business education (Billett, 2019; Billett *et al.*, 2020; Hains-Wesson *et al.*, 2021; Hains-Wesson and Ji, 2020a), we evaluate a large-scale, in-person and non-compulsory placement programme within an Australian context by exploring the combined perceptions of undergraduate and postgraduate business students and industry hosts. The following research question helped guide our investigation: which was what are the key preparation and post-learning curriculum improvements most required to advance a non-compulsory, individual, in-person, unpaid business placement programme?

Programme design

To address this research question, we conducted a case study on an Australian university business school's in-person, non-compulsory, unpaid placement programme that occurred in-semester over twelve weeks or intensely for six weeks from 2017–2022. The programme was

offered four times annually and attracted around 1,500 yearly applications. Students underwent a competitive selection process, requiring a minimum of 48 credit points in Business School units (equivalent to one year of study) and a minimum 60% weighted average mark (WAM). Successful applicants, totalling up to 400 undergraduate and postgraduate students annually went on to receive six credit points towards their degree upon completion of the placement experience (Hains-Wesson *et al.*, 2021; Bracken *et al.*, 2022). For the intensive offering, which occurred internationally, 65 to 70 students annually participated in the USA or South America programme for six weeks full-time, unpaid and during the summer (January to February), with a similar number engaging in winter (July) in China or Europe. It is also important to note that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the international programme was temporarily halted, except for the USA, which resumed in 2023. Therefore, this study exclusively included pre-COVID international placement data, whilst all other placement enrolments remained stable from 2017–2022.

Despite the placement programme being non-compulsory and unpaid, high demand surpassed placement availability, a common occurrence in business education in Australia (Bracken *et al.*, 2022). Thus, equity measures were introduced to widen access. First, we prohibited students from undertaking both local and international placements simultaneously and the same applied to equity scholarships. Second, the programme's selection phase, which included CV, application and a group interview, was opened to all students, providing skill-based badges for writing an appropriate CV and/or completing foundations in interview skills. Each placement applicant who took part in either the application and/or interview also received tailored employability feedback and no matter if they were successfully matched to a host supervisor or not.

Therefore, this part of the placement programme for both local and international work experience included three main preparation and learning phases. The first phase (as previously mentioned) was the application process and selection mechanisms that mirrored industry practice. Students filled out an online expression of interest, uploaded a current CV and provided a short reflective note on why they believed they were suitable to undertake a placement before being invited to complete an interview with peers. We employed technology to provide students with tailored, automated feedback on employability skills by instigating the Student Relationship Engagement System (SRES) (https://sres.io/explainer/) for automated and personalised employability feedback and digital badge attainment. Developed by teachers for teachers, the SRES system facilitates scalable personalisation of student feedback and engagement. It is freely available via Creative Commons, contributing to a +50% increase in student preparation placement completion rates.

Students who advanced to the next phase of the selection process underwent a student group interview with employability experts, including industry partners, where they tackled tasks like problem-solving challenges. This exercise evaluated teamwork, communication and the ability to work under pressure. Technology is again employed to provide students with tailored feedback on interview skills, along with options for improvement through appointments with the university's career service team. Upon completing the initial two stages, students received an official invitation to participate in the "during" placement programme, though a placement was not guaranteed.

Once students secured a placement with adequate supervision, the graded placement curriculum became active (i.e. during placement). In this programme phase, placement teachers further equip students for their work experience, conduct regular check-ins, oversee governance and risk management and assess employability skill development through reflective learning tasks. It's crucial to highlight that industry host supervisors do not participate in the grading of students' assessments, given the varied nature of placement experiences. Instead, their role focusses on providing supervision and meaningful work and collaborating with teachers to help students achieve the programme's learning outcomes.

The teaching framework focusses on students' reflective learning and practice, oral presentation skill development, report writing and purposefully linking theory to practice. This is achieved by students completing the following learning components: (1) a three-hour group pre-placement workshop; (2) a two-hour group mid-way check-in via zoom and several optional individual consultation meetings when required; (3) health and safety milestone checks; (4) a reflective report on students' entry interview with their host supervisor to set up performance objectives; (5) two online modules where students reflect on learnings gained and (6) an end-of-programme debrief session that includes an industry networking event with past student graduates and industry members (also see, Hains-Wesson *et al.*, 2021).

Each phase of the selection process and teaching framework centres on preparing students for a placement, unpacking placement issues and challenges and how to evidence and measure employability skill development for job readiness. For instance, when reviewing students' performance objectives, teachers emphasise the need for personal and professional learning goals, collaboratively refined with the host supervisor before submission. Reflective essays require critical self-reflection on pre-placement, on-placement and post-placement experiences, backing claims with relevant literature, theories and models. Students articulate expectations, desired employability skill enhancements and insights gained, contributing to future career development.

Methodology
We employ a case study methodology, using self-assessed, pre-determined survey questions to gather quantitative and qualitative data via online surveys. The questions focus on challenges, benefits and the key employability skills developed in a large in-person and unpaid business school placement programme. This approach is ideal for pinpointing areas of divergence (Flyvbjerg, 2004; Kember *et al.*, 2017). By using self-assessed quantitative data and open-ended qualitative responses, we enhance our understanding of the phenomenon being explored. For instance, participants shared information, allowing both statistical measurement of perceptions and insights from both quantitative and qualitative responses (Creswell, 2012). Adhering to an accepted case study methodology, we meticulously documented, recorded and analysed individual and collective data sets before consensus making, enhancing the study's validity. The research project received ethics clearance, ensuring the anonymity of all collected data (SHR Project, 2017–2023/040).

Survey design
Student survey
We designed a placement experience survey drawing from validated instruments (Courtney-Pratt *et al.*, 2015; Cooper *et al.*, 2020). For instance, the WIL Evaluation Tool (Courtney-Pratt *et al.*, 2015) offers a flexible online system that is universally accessible to consistently measure students' professional learning experiences. Employing a survey adaptation approach (Artino *et al.*, 2014), we borrowed and adjusted relevant questions aligned with our research objectives. This method proves to be beneficial for leveraging validated instruments adaptable to a specific research context. The final survey instruments were tested with non-placement teaching colleagues through word-of-mouth and a snowballing technique, aligning with practices endorsed in the literature (Leavy, 2014). The survey instrument asked participants to reflect on their pre- and post-placement experiences, whether the programme met their expectations, how challenging the different phases were, such as the selection process, constructive alignment, such as how the different learning components within the programme connected to their placement experience, their skills and career aspirations and the types of opportunities they developed from completing the programme [1].

Industry survey instrument

We designed the industry survey questions based on the initial findings from the student survey. This type of survey creation, which is based on a set of results from a previous survey, is referred to as survey replication (Perry *et al.*, 2022). We, therefore, chose this type of survey replication process because one of the main aims of the case study was to ascertain students' employability skill growth over time. The survey questions focussed on asking industry supervisors to self-assess students' level of employability and skills pre- and post-placement using a Likert scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being poor and 5 being excellent. The host supervisors completed the survey once the students had finished the programme, influencing retrospective reflection.

Data collection and analysis

Context

We invited placement students as well as industry supervisors via a general email invitation. We also advertised for participant involvement through the placement programme's learning management announcement system. This study utilises a total of N = 1,006 student responses (35% response rate) and N = 240 host supervisors' perspectives (25% response rate). In Table 1, we present the student placement distribution by country and speak more about industry response data in the results section of this paper.

Importantly, participant demographic information, including gender, year level and discipline area, is deliberately excluded here, as it was detailed in a previous study (Hains-Wesson *et al.*, 2021). Thus, the results presented here intentionally extend a longitudinal study to improve placement pedagogy and practice. Thus, the "during phase" of the programme has been extensively published elsewhere and will not be revisited in its entirety here (Hains-Wesson *et al.*, 2021). Instead, the pre- and post-learning phases of the placement programme are the focus of this article.

In the following section, we present quantitative and qualitative survey data, encompassing participants' perceptions of their placement learning experience and host supervisors' perceptions of students' employability skill development. These findings inform strategies for enhancing pre- and post-learning placement curriculum opportunities to bolster students' job readiness, which is relatively scarce in the business education literature (Billett *et al.*, 2020; Hains-Wesson and jI, 2020b).

Findings

Preparation

Participants were asked to rank seven expectations when applying for the placement programme, ranging from 1 (most important) to 7 (least important) (see Table 2). Results indicate that the top three priorities were gaining relevant work experience, improving career

Year 2017–2022	Destination	No. of students
	South America (Chile)	14
	China (Shanghai and Beijing)	155
	Australia (Canberra and Sydney)	675
	Europe (France)	42
	USA (LA and Washington DC)	120
Total		1,006

Table 1.
Student placement destination

Source(s): Authors' own work

prospects and experiencing business hands-on, whereas improving employability skills and establishing/enhancing business networks were considered the least important. Variability in responses, such as high interest in gaining relevant work experience versus less interest in improving organisational skills, highlights potential areas of divergence. This discrepancy poses a challenge. The programme aims to develop students' employability skills for job readiness. However, if students' expectations sway more towards gaining a certain type of work experience in a particular organisation to improve career prospects, then less concern is placed on improving employability skills across different business contexts. This finding provides an observed misalignment between the programme's main learning goal and students' expectations, which may influence students' and industry hosts' satisfaction with the placement programme as a whole.

A closer scrutiny of the literature also reveals that student dissatisfaction with placement matching is a major concern, particularly for international students (Woo *et al.*, 2017). Further, if students' learning expectations are misaligned with the placement programme's main learning goal, students may continue to overlook the benefits of small to medium organisations versus Fortune Global 500 companies, increasing learner anxiety and placement tension between students and industry hosts (Atfield *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, large organisations with well-established recruitment pipelines are less inclined to accept students with language challenges, visa restrictions or where students are academically challenged (Gribble *et al.*, 2015; Pham *et al.*, 2018). Thus, if students' expectations are continually misaligned with the programme's matching outcomes, this can also amplify placement dissatisfaction and increase unrealistic demands. Not all students will secure placements with Fortune Global 500 companies, making alternative options like small to medium firms increasingly crucial (Dean and Rook, 2023; Gribble *et al.*, 2015).

Post-learning
Students reflected on the placement experience with varied responses (see Table 3). A few found it "extremely helpful" (6%), whilst a larger percentage noted it "very helpful" (39%), with 25% considering it "somewhat helpful". Uncertainty was expressed by 26% and 4% found it to be "not at all helpful". Regarding whether the placement met their learning expectations, the majority (90%) affirmed that it did. For instance, participants commented that the programme "provided much needed exposure to industry relevant knowledge and practices" (2017, Australia) and "offered hands-on experience and real responsibilities that advanced my skills both technically and socially, and the experience has shaped my career journey in a very positive and enlightening way" (2019, China). However, 10% responded negatively, citing a mismatch with their major or a lack of relevant work experience. As one student explained, "I was hoping to work for a larger organisation that had more traditional business operations" (2018, Australia). These results further posit that when a misalignment

Expectations	Count	Average	Std.Dev
To gain relevant work experience	935	1.54	1.00
To improve my career prospects	873	2.32	1.12
To experience business in a hands-on setting	783	2.82	1.26
To improve my business communication skills	647	3.46	1.82
To enhance my technical skills	567	3.60	1.70
To establish/enhance my business network	663	3.61	1.71
To improve my organisational skills	427	4.22	2.06
Source(s): Authors' own work			

Table 2.
Students' response to
preparation learning

	No.	%
How well the programme prepared you for the actual placement experience?		
Extremely helpful	60	6
Very helpful	392	39
Somewhat helpful	252	25
Uncertain	262	26
Not at all helpful	40	4
Total	1,006	100
Did the programme meet your expectations?		
No	97	10
Yes	909	90
Total	1,006	100
Source(s): Authors' own work		

Table 3.
Students' expectations for post-learning

occurs between a student's expectations and the placement programme's main learning goal, placement learning disappointment and unhappiness arise (Lindsay and Mahinroosta, 2018; Odlin *et al.*, 2022).

Not all students possess a deep awareness of effective placement opportunities or the mechanisms for preparation and execution. This gap became apparent when students were asked to respond to their understanding of the programme's key learning outcomes by rating them on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) (see Table 4). The majority of students indicated increased industry knowledge (Avg. 4.51, Std.Dev 0.67) and clarified career goals (Avg. 4.36, Std.Dev 0.74), which is a known placement benefit regardless of the organisation type, especially when quality supervision and relevant work experience are assumed (Gomes and Williams, 2012). These results also highlight that the placement enhanced industry contacts, enabling students to align themselves with the target professions for professional development. Such outcomes are key elements of a successful placement programme (Tomlinson and Jackson, 2021) but only when they are clearly connected to university learning and improve employability skill development through a purposefully designed curriculum (Billett, 2015, 2019; Billett *et al.*, 2020).

Where students saw further benefit from the placement experience was when we asked them if they would prefer to work for the same organisation that they were placed with upon graduation. Over half of the responses were in the affirmative (see Table 5). When participants were questioned about the survey choices, the majority of participants stated

Statements	Count	Average	Std.Dev
The placement allowed me to link university learning to skills and knowledge	924	3.95	0.91
I found the work with the organisation stimulating	782	4.02	0.96
I was given appropriate training, guidance and feedback on my performance	923	4.08	0.87
I was given the opportunity to meet my agreed performance objectives?	783	4.21	0.76
I felt that my work contributed to the organisation's goals	784	4.20	0.71
I was able to make valuable contacts	925	4.25	0.80
The learning experience was challenging and meaningful	923	4.25	0.83
I was motivated by my experience	924	4.26	0.85
I gained information to clarify my career goals	784	4.36	0.74
I learned more about the industry	925	4.51	0.67
Source(s): Authors' own work			

Table 4.
Students' responses to post-learning

	No.						%
Would you consider working for this organisation after graduating?							
Yes	456						56
No	197						25
Unsure	155						19
Total	808						100
Have you been offered any further work opportunities since completing this unit?							
Yes	291						36
No	517						64
Total	808						100
The programme will assist me in getting a job in the future?							
Strongly agree	450						45
Agree	430						43
Neither agree nor disagree	86						9
Disagree	28						3
Strongly disagree	5						0
Total	999						100
Source(s): Authors' own work							

Table 5.
Students' post-placement employment perceptions

that the organisational culture, team vibe and alignment of a position with their career aspirations were the main reasons. On the other hand, participants who chose "Unsure" or "No" mentioned that they felt that their placement experience did not match their personal or professional interests. Interestingly, only 30% of students gained employment offers with the same organisation, 6% with a different employer and 63% did not receive an offer at all. These results further show that there is a potential discrepancy between the programme's goals and students' expectations because 46% of students strongly agreed and 43% agreed that the placement programme would assist them in securing future employment with their placement host organisation.

Industry perceptions
To ascertain the industry's viewpoints about which employability skills students increased the most and over time, we invited industry supervisors to rate their students' employability skill growth post-placement. We used a Likert scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent). A paired sample *t*-test to the data was applied, examining which skills were enhanced the most. Table 6 displays significantly increased average ratings of employability skills post-placement, including

	No.	Before Average	Std.Dev	No.	After Average	Std.Dev	Paired sample *t*-test t	Sig
Communication skills	240	4.15	0.81	235	4.44	0.70	7.660	***
Teamwork skills	240	4.24	0.71	235	4.52	0.60	9.206	***
Organisation skills	240	4.07	0.75	235	4.42	0.64	9.978	***
Interpersonal skills	240	4.14	0.84	235	4.42	0.70	8.737	***
Technical skills	239	3.88	0.82	235	4.29	0.63	11.295	***
Professionalism/ethics	240	4.26	0.78	235	4.46	0.67	6.630	***
Knowledge of sector	240	3.55	0.87	235	4.21	0.66	16.509	***
Critical thinking	240	4.02	0.77	235	4.28	0.70	8.744	***
Source(s): Authors' own work								

Table 6.
Industry's perspectives on students' employability skills

notable enhancements in sector knowledge, technical skills and organisational skills. Areas for further improvement identified were professionalism, ethics and communication skills.

The survey also included questions for respondents to propose improvements to the placement programme, which have been extensively discussed elsewhere (Hains-Wesson *et al.*, 2021) and will not be comprehensively revisited here due to word count limitations. Summarising briefly, respondents from 2017–2020 (N = 153) highlight the programme's benefits to their organisation, emphasising the introduction of new ideas and innovations, contributing to a competitive recruitment pipeline.

Host supervisors generally agreed that more background knowledge about the host organisation and the project details would largely assist participants to "hit the ground running" (i.e. 2019, China). With some hosts preferring to be involved in the candidates' selection processes, "we had no input in the options (of interns) at all, and have been provided the CVs of the chosen people, which made it difficult when managing tasks, interests and/or capabilities" (2018, Australia). Furthermore, host concerns were raised about the length of the programme and its limitations in providing in-depth experience in the long term.

Whilst hosts acknowledged the complexities of a large-scale placement programme around equity and resourcing, they recommended that the programme should offer an option for students to extend their placement to fully utilise the opportunity. However, host supervisors did not offer to pay students for an extended placement time. Overall, the hosts were impressed with the students' skill improvement over time, especially their interpersonal skills and knowledge of the industry sector. As one host stated, "[The participant] knew very little about the pharmaceutical industry when started, but she became the expert who led our social media campaign and did a brilliant job" (2020, China).

Discussion and conclusion

Business school placement programmes and the teams that manage them often do not have the appropriate resources to continually find new ways to evaluate programmes that include student and industry perspectives. However, this study provides a blueprint to help placement practitioners who find themselves in similar situations undertake an evidence-based approach to evaluating a large-scale, in-person, unpaid business placement programme.

The findings presented here reinforce that business students are keenly aware of expected employability skills during industry work experience (Mainga *et al.*, 2022) and despite unrealistic expectations of being placed in a large, branded corporation and receiving employment upon completion. This issue becomes pronounced if host supervisors lack the resources or training to support and improve a self-directed lifelong learner for an unknown career (Sollosy and McInerney, 2022). Further, students may not be placement-ready, meet the criteria or acquire inappropriate supervision that occurs in a less relevant industry sector to their interests. This in turn increases unrealistic expectations, a mismatch between students' expectations and the programme's main learning goal as well as increasing student placement matching unhappiness and/or host dissatisfaction with the programme.

Therefore, our focus on evaluating a large-scale business placement programme in the areas of preparation and post-learning is pertinent. It is a placement curriculum area of concern that is less explored in the literature (Billett *et al.*, 2020). The results from this study help to reveal some key future curriculum improvements to consider. First, students continue to prioritise gaining relevant work experience over employability skill development, influencing unrealistic expectations with host-matching outcomes and being employed upon completion of the programme. Thus, the placement programme team ought to be clear about the reality of students being matched to small and medium-sized organisations, the benefits of such matching and that it is highly unlikely that they will acquire employment with the same company. In terms of industry input to improve the placement programme, the teaching

and assessment of skill development in professionalism, ethics and communication skills need advancement, which also aligns with the research in this area (Jewell *et al.*, 2020).

In summary, placement programmes are highly problematic to get right (Odlin *et al.*, 2022), especially when necessitating multiple stakeholders' expectations as well as university and government mandates and policies (Billett, 2015; Jackson, 2015). Therefore, continual evaluation to improve placement pedagogy is one way to ensure that students', industries' and teachers' goals are aligned whilst embracing new opportunities. The results of this study are therefore highly valuable as a springboard for providing a blueprint to evaluate and improve business placement pedagogy and practice. Thus, the following recommendations are based on the findings presented here.

Key recommendations

(1) Preparation and post-learning: to provide clear expectation-setting narratives through student- and industry-inspired videos and/or text- and image-based stories, expressing the opportunities and benefits of undertaking small and medium organisation placements with industry.

(2) Preparation learning: engagement of industry hosts in programme design, candidate selection processes and training workshops. Preparatory materials on host organisation and industry fundamentals are made available to selected participants and co-designed workshops to include essential work-ready skills required by the host organisations.

(3) Preparation learning: to continue to provide preparation employability skill awareness feedback via technology to reach both non-successful and successful student placement candidates, widening non-compulsory placement preparation experiences for all.

(4) Preparation and post-learning: to provide up-to-date statistics of how many students are unlikely to secure a graduate employment opportunity upon completing a placement programme with the same host organisation or any future employer.

(5) Preparation and post-learning: to partner with students to develop short tailored and relevant hot tip videos along with online learning modules to highlight how students can better prepare, learn and improve their skills in the realm of professionalism, ethics and communication skills (oral, text and image/video) whilst maintaining knowledge of relevant business sectors.

Limitations and future directions

This study concentrates on evaluating an Australian university business school's placement programme to improve preparation and post-learning curriculum development and practice. We did not compare our results or validate them for other settings, disciplines or student cohorts. Nor did we compare the similarities or differences between undergraduate and postgraduate business students' perceptions about placement learning or between local and international placement experiences. The study does not compare or contrast against other types of WIL programmes at different universities, locations or contexts, nor does it consider the participants' gender, age, discipline areas or diverse backgrounds. These limitations have been reported elsewhere (Hains-Wesson *et al.*, 2021), with further research underway to evaluate non-successful placement students' experiences during the preparation phase of the placement programme.

In pointing out the various limitations, this study is still timely and relevant. For instance, there is much discourse on the benefits and/or unfairness of unpaid placements and how to ensure quality WIL programmes and guarantee students and industry as partners in placement design, delivery and evaluation processes. This study has highlighted a set of five recommendations to assist with such challenges, utilising an evidence-based approach to enhance a business school's placement curriculum to improve practice, benefiting multiple stakeholders, including university WIL teams, students and industry. It would therefore be advantageous to expand upon this investigation, building upon the results presented here to include different WIL types, demographic locations and global and economic factors.

Notes

1. For a copy of the survey questions, contact the first named author.

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