



Charles Sturt University

Case study report

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This case study is one of eight studies which contribute to a wider project:
Shaping the 21st Century Student Experience at Regional Universities
<http://shapingtheregionalstudentexperience.com.au/>

Executive summary

Charles Sturt University (CSU) is a large, regional, multi campus university with over 39,000 enrolments. More than 13,000 workplace learning placements occur each year. For this case study, and as part of the broader project looking at the experience of diverse student populations at regional universities, the research team investigated the role of workplace learning in shaping and influencing the regional students' experience of university as well as preparing them for life after university.

The researchers undertook semi-structured interviews with both CSU staff and students. Seven CSU staff, identified as owners of innovative practice or strategic influence were interviewed for this case study. Six students were interviewed, representing both current students and graduates, as well as those studying on campus and by distance education .

The following themes were identified in this case study:

- 1) **Workplace learning supports student engagement and retention**
Workplace learning has a significant impact on students' experience at CSU. It is an important factor in engaging students with their studies and retaining them at university.
- 2) **Workplace learning in the regions is both challenging and beneficial**
CSU students are shown to highly value their workplace learning despite the personal challenges often associated with cost and distance of regional work placements.
- 3) **Workplace learning results in a range of benefits for students during and after their studies at CSU**
- 4) **CSU policy and culture has supported its extensive workplace learning program**
- 5) **Workplace learning builds capacity in CSU's regions for students, supervisors and employers**

1 Introduction

1.1 Context

Charles Sturt University (CSU) is a large, regional, multi campus university with more than 39,000 students worldwide. Established in 1989, Charles Sturt University has grown to become Australia's largest regional university and is also the country's leading provider of distance education. CSU's largest physical presence is in NSW with campuses in Albury-Wodonga, Bathurst, Dubbo, Goulburn, Orange, Port Macquarie, and Wagga Wagga and centres, in partnership with TAFE, in Wangaratta, Griffith and Parkes. CSU also has a presence in metropolitan areas with centres in Sydney (Manly, Parramatta), Canberra, Melbourne and Brisbane.

CSU has an extensive program of workplace learning with more than 13,000 workplace learning placements taking place each year. Workplace learning aims to ensure graduates are skilled to succeed in their chosen industry. Through workplace learning, students gain the knowledge, capabilities, practices, attitudes, ethics and dispositions of their discipline or profession and develop skills to engage with workplaces constructively, respectfully and effectively.

According to the latest data released on the Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) website, CSU has the highest graduate employment rate in the country. Workplace learning connects CSU students with employment and provides industry with skilled and work-ready graduates.

1.2 Purpose of report

In this case study, the research team have investigated the role of workplace learning in shaping and influencing the students' experience of university as well as preparing them for life after university.

2 Case design

2.1 Case study plan

This case study was conducted as part of Stage 2 of the OLT project of the *Shaping the 21st century student experience at regional universities* (Australian Office for Learning and Teaching Grant SP14-4602). The broader OLT project seeks to understand the 21st century experiences of the diverse undergraduate student populations of regional universities to identify how equitable outcomes for these students can be achieved. This case study looked specifically at the experiences of current students and graduates who have undertaken workplace learning as part of their degrees and examined the impact of workplace learning on students' engagement with their degrees and its role in preparing students for life after university.

2.2 Theme

2.2.1 Theme title: Workplace learning in a regional university.

2.2.2 Theme description: Case study of workplace learning (WPL) at a regional university. The case study focused on the impact of workplace learning on students' experience at university and the benefits of workplace learning on their future prospects.

2.2.3 Unit/Units of analysis: The ways in which workplace learning enhances the 21st century regional student's experience of university as well as preparing them for life after university.

2.2.4 Theme scope

What is included:

- Institutional data on workplace learning at CSU
- Student interviews: Experiences of current students and graduates who have undertaken workplace learning as part of their degrees and the real and perceived impact of workplace learning on their future prospects.
- Staff interviews: Perceptions of staff on WPL in regional universities.

What is not included:

- Information/experiences of employers.
- Experiences of students in courses without a significant workplace learning component.
- Perceptions of staff not involved with workplace learning at CSU.

2.2.5 Participants

CSU invited CSU students (both current and graduates) and staff (past and present operational and leadership) to participate in interviews for the case study.

Seven staff identified as 'owners' of innovative practice or strategic oversight were identified by the Project Leader and invited by phone and email to participate. Staff interviewees for the case study included course directors, practice coordinators and the former Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic). Six student interviewees were individually identified and invited to participate to ensure the case study captured the diversity of CSU's student population. Students were identified by faculty and invited to participate by email. Course Directors assisted with identifying students for interview.

Both CSU students and recent graduates were interviewed for this case study. There was an equal gender split of participants and students were representative of regional and rural students studying on campus together with metropolitan students studying by distance education. Participants were drawn from each of CSU faculties.

2.3 Data Collection, management and Analysis

The researchers undertook semi-structured interviews with CSU staff and students. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed using Thematic Analysis and both deductive and inductive coding in NVivo. Identifying information has not been included in reported findings. Contextual institutional data was sourced from CSU's Office of Strategic Planning and Information.

Data and reports associated with the case study were progressively sent to the lead institution (the University of the Sunshine Coast), for backup and secure storage.

3 Timeline

Table 1 Case study timeline

	2015					2016					
	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June
Activities											
Invite participants		X									
Conduct interviews/ focus groups		X	X	X		X	X				
Conduct analysis							X	X			
Write report				X	X			X	X	X	X

4 Findings

4.1 Overview

Thematic analysis

This case study presents five themes in relation to workplace learning at CSU:

- 1) **Workplace learning supports student engagement and retention**
- 2) **Workplace learning in the regions is both challenging and beneficial**
- 3) **Workplace learning results in a range of benefits for students during and after their studies at CSU**
- 4) **CSU policy and culture has supported its extensive workplace learning program**
- 5) **Workplace learning builds capacity in CSU's regions for students, supervisors and employers**

These themes, and related subthemes are presented below in Table 2 with example quotes from the data.

4.2 Description of themes

Table 2: Workplace learning at CSU - Themes and subthemes

<p>Theme 1: Workplace learning supports student engagement and retention Workplace learning supports student engagement and retention: workplace learning has a significant impact on students' experience at CSU. It is an important factor in engaging students with their studies and retaining them at university.</p>
<p><i>Subtheme 1: Workplace learning engages students</i> 'I don't think you <i>need</i> to engage students in workplace learning. ...students have chosen these degrees because they want to be the professional that they want to be. So workplace learning is the chance for them to get to do that. It's the practical stuff, it's the hands-on stuff, it's what they thought they were going to do when they started the degree. Engagement is not hard. They want to do it and they enjoy it. It's a real value-add.' Head of School</p>
<p><i>Subtheme 2: Confirms students' direction</i> 'I kind of knew that's where I wanted to head. But getting more in-depth in that and finding out more about it was really great because it confirmed to me that that's what I want to do.' Student (S3)</p>
<p><i>Subtheme 3: Maintains students' interest in the course</i> 'And that's why they come back. They have that renewed sense and vigour and intent and even if it can be really stressful, those sort of work environments are stressful anyway and it's just fantastic, the relationships you develop with patients, with colleagues, give you a sense of what you want to do.' Head of School</p>
<p>Theme 2: Workplace learning in the regions is both challenging and beneficial For a regional university, the challenges of workplace learning are heightened. It is challenging to find enough</p>

<p>placements for students and students are often required to travel to take up placements. This comes at a cost for students financially and personally. Despite these challenges, students place great value on their placements and gain many benefits from placements in the regions.</p>
<p><i>Subtheme 1: Geographical challenges of Placing students in the regions</i> ‘The biggest difference for us [as a regional university] is that our students can go anywhere - pretty much from Albury to anywhere in Victoria, anywhere in NSW - they could in fact go beyond those borders.’ Head of School</p> <p>‘We do try to move students out into more remote areas we don't have the luxury of placing students only in our regional campus areas as much as our students would like that. That is difficult for students so we have to give them a great deal of warning that one they may be required to live away from campus or live away from home for a placement and that causes a great deal of angst financial and organisational because many of them are working and have to give up a job and they're paying accommodation here and need to pay double accommodation.’ Professional Education Unit</p>
<p><i>Subtheme 2: Financial and time challenges for students managing placements</i> ‘Like your job, your part-time job, you're working - you had to take them and sit them down and say look this is what we've got to do, we're away for a month and we just had to hope that our jobs would be good with that - I was lucky and I was - a lot of people struggled for their workplace to be happy with that.’ Student (S1)</p>
<p><i>Subtheme 3: Benefits of regional placements</i> ‘I think that rural experiences are fantastic experiences. The students often get the most out of the ones where they're in a rural environment because they get to see everything, they learn to work in environments that aren't so resource rich sometimes, but the quality of the experience is fantastic and there's some great supervisors. It's a different experience but it's certainly not a lesser experience in a regional centre. They can do some amazing things that are just so different.’ Head of School</p> <p>‘So our students sell themselves very well being from a regional university in the fact that they're a lot more open to do travel, to stay away and to take those chances.’ Senior Lecturer</p>
<p>Theme 3: Workplace learning results in a range of benefits for students Students reported many benefits from their placements, from the development of their skills and professional identity to the gaining of networks and employment.</p>
<p><i>Subtheme 1: Development of professional identity</i> ‘Your identity as a professional. It's about thinking I've learnt something at uni, these are all the things I'm being prepared for but I actually went out and did it and it worked. Or I did it and I had affirmation that I can do this job. Or I felt what it was to be the professional that I'm going to be. You can learn lots of stuff and in different environments, but I think what placement mostly does is, at the end of the day, you start to become the person that you're aiming to be.’ Head of School</p>
<p><i>Subtheme 2: Making an active contribution</i> ‘The first two work placements I definitely felt like I made an active impression and I felt really, really welcome and the work I was doing was actually helping the business. ...I created a database ...and then they were able to use that database to send out leaflets for our ...program. That was one of the things that I did and they're still using that database that I set up.’ Student (S6)</p>
<p><i>Subtheme 3: Confidence in their skills</i> ‘It really improved my skills, I felt. And I went back to uni feeling more confident knowing that we did know what we were doing, putting it all into perspective - what we do in the classroom onto road.’ Student (S1)</p>
<p><i>Subtheme 4: Gaining professional networks and mentors</i> ‘The biggest benefit was getting know - and getting to know the teachers and how they work and all that. Creating professional networks, working with people and getting to know them and having them share</p>

<p>knowledge with you and stuff like that.’ Student (S5)</p>
<p><i>Subtheme 5: Gaining employment</i></p> <p>‘It does give them opportunities and it does give them jobs. We know our students have got jobs as a result of their placement. In fact it's one of our problems in accounting, the students get jobs after their placement and then sometimes their studies take second place.’ Course Director</p> <p>‘One of the guys that I was working with really wants me to do work in his team. So he's working on creating a role for me.’ Student (S3)</p>
<p>Theme 4: CSU policy and culture has supported the development of workplace learning across the institution</p> <p>CSU has a university-wide policy focus on strengthening and maintaining high quality workplace learning as an important aspect of student engagement. The institution has invested significantly in research on workplace learning and in developing its program of workplace learning in its undergraduate courses.</p> <p>‘We realised quite early on the profile that the university had which was overwhelmingly a profile of professional education and that the majority of CSU courses had large parts of workplace learning in them. We decided to build on that in two ways: one was to invest significantly in research and reflection on workplace learning. ... We then also started to encourage people to think about introducing workplace learning to other courses. And so we got to a point where the aim for the university was really to have virtually all its undergraduate programs, all its pre-entry to a profession programs, some of them at the Masters level, involving substantial workplace learning.’ Emeritus Professor and former DVC</p>
<p>Theme 5: Workplace learning builds capacity in CSU’s regions.</p> <p>CSU has more than 13,000 work placements occurring each year. Many CSU graduates go on to work in regional Australia and CSU academics spoke of their responsibility for developing and preparing their students to become professionals who are ready to both work and live in regional communities.</p>
<p><i>Subtheme 1: Preparing students to live and work in the regions</i></p> <p>‘Something like up to 40 percent of teachers in NSW... are educated by Charles Sturt so the quality of teaching comes back to us quite clearly. ... It's not just the quality of the candidates you prepare, but when they are forming such a significant proportion of the teaching profession in the area, I think it's another layer of responsibility on us to ensure that when our students go out they're not only ready to teach, they're ready to live and work in what is often a small, can be isolated community, can have a significant Indigenous population, and is often removed from their family or their friendship groups.’ Professional Education Unit</p>
<p><i>Subtheme 2: CSU’s program of workplace learning also provides professional development opportunities for professional supervisors</i></p> <p>‘I think the most distinctive thing about our Distance Ed - all our courses - is the level of post-graduate training that we give our supervising practitioners in the field. ... We've developed, using an OLT grant, some Masters level training programs for the supervisors so that when they take a student they consciously take on an education role as well as their expert practitioners role.’ Sub-Dean Workplace Learning</p>
<p><i>Subtheme 3: Supporting the needs of employers</i></p> <p>‘Students on placement can value add to the site. We've talked about employment but they can also value add to the service delivery. If we have students we can see more clients, we can provide a service that we can't otherwise provide. That's important for regional communities to think about having an extra workforce. Yes, they need supervision, they can't just do things on their own but there's something that they might be able to do that will value add.’ Senior Lecturer</p>

4.3 Observations from the case study

Workplace learning has a major impact on students' experience at university. It is a key factor in students beginning to take on their professional identity and in engaging them with their studies. Students felt that workplace learning prepared them for life after university: developing their skills and confidence and giving them an idea of what to expect in the workforce and in their profession.

Many of CSU's graduates go on to work in CSU's regions and staff at CSU take their responsibility for preparing students to both work and live in regional communities very seriously.

While this case study examines the ways in which workplace learning enhances the 21st century regional student's experience of university, the research also highlighted the increasing number of metropolitan students enrolling with CSU by distance who are involved in workplace learning. This trend raises a number of questions and challenges including managing placements for this growing cohort.

5 Understanding the regional student experience

5.1 Insights gained

There are challenges associated with such an extensive program of workplace learning in the regions. It can be difficult to find enough placements and also to manage placements that are widely spread out. Students are often required to travel away from home for their placement and may need to stay away for blocks of time, forgoing income from their work at home and incurring other expenses such as accommodation, transport and living costs while on placement.

Despite these challenges, students are shown to highly value their workplace learning experiences. Students come to CSU to join a profession and expect workplace learning will be a part of their degree. Students prepare in advance to be able to do their placements—whether that is speaking to their employers to arrange time off from work and/or planning their finances ahead of time to assist with the costs of placement.

During and after their studies, students are gaining a range of benefits from the workplace learning elements of their degrees. Workplace learning confirms students' direction and maintains their interest as they study. Workplace learning aids the development of students' professional identities allowing them to making an active contribution in their field while still studying. Students gain confidence in their skills, professional networks and mentors, as well as employment through their work placements.

5.2 Good practice examples

CSU is trialling new technology, CompTracker, in its Paramedics degree which is enhancing both student and supervisor engagement. Student S1 was part of this trial during her placement: 'It was just an app and when we're out on road with the patients and stuff we can write up patient reports, what sort of calls we were going to, the priority of the patient, the age, the sex and a bit of a patient story that the patient gave us and what we thought was going wrong and stuff like that. And then we'd mark off skills that we'd done through that job and then our clinical preceptor that we were working with was able to create an account on that and were able to log on and sign off on the skills and sign off on the jobs that we actually did so it was being reviewed by them as well.' Student (S1)

Through use of the app, the case study showed students forming stronger relationships with their preceptors and a positive impact on students' learning outcomes with stronger student engagement with their learning and more engaged supervisors.

The senior lecturer also noted a benefit of this tool is that it is engaging professional supervisors in a different way which has a beneficial flow on effect to students. The tool includes a preceptor comments box; however, the senior lecturer did not expect a great uptake of this option as it increases the supervisor's workload. The option was given to students to ask their supervisor to comment and sign off on reports rather than the lecturer.

The use of the CompTracker App encourages students to seek greater input from their supervisors and enables their CSU lecturer to monitor their learning progress in real time, providing support to both student and/or supervisors as necessary. The app has given supervisors a mechanism for stronger engagement with students on placements and as a result students are gaining better learning outcomes, making a more meaningful contribution in the workplace, and forming stronger relationships with their supervisors.

6 Implications

The link between workplacements and graduate employment in the regions was a strong theme in this case study. Training students in the regions keeps them in the regions. This is not just important for our graduates, but for the economic development of Australia.

Going forward, CSU will need to ensure that placements are available in metropolitan areas to meet the needs of the growing numbers of metropolitan students studying by distance with CSU.

7 Conclusion

Workplace learning at CSU increases students' engagement with their studies and their retention at university. Workplace learning plays an important role in the development of students' professional identities and preparing them for working in their field—and for many students, for living and working in regional communities.

In terms of innovative practice, the key innovation has been CSU's policy decision to focus on, invest in and broaden structured workplace learning experiences across the institution. This was in response to student feedback that they valued their work placements and evidence showing it was highly effective in student engagement, retention and graduate outcomes.

Regardless of the fact that CSU is a regional university, it provides world class placement and learning opportunities for students which enhance the student experience at CSU. The success of CSU's program of workplace learning is backed by CSU having the number one graduate employment rate in Australia.

8 Funding acknowledgement

Support for this project has been provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The views in this project do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.