



Workplace learning shapes the student experience

The challenge

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. Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching consistently ranks CSU amongst the highest for graduate employment.¹ This case study investigated the role of workplace learning in shaping and influencing regional students' experience of university, and preparing students for life after university.

Specifically, this case investigated the experiences of current students and graduates who have undertaken workplace learning as part of their undergraduate degree, and examined the impact of workplace learning on students' engagement with their learning and its role in preparing students for life after university.

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The researchers undertook semi-structured interviews with seven CSU staff and six students. The six students interviewed included current on-campus and distance students, and graduates.

Key findings

Five themes emerged from the analysis of the data.

Theme 1: Workplace learning supports student engagement and retention – the study found that students actively participate in workplace learning because it is relevant, confirms their choice of degree and increases their interest in their studies.

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)

Theme 2: Workplace learning in the regions is both challenging and beneficial – the study found that the challenges of workplace learning are heightened for regional students. Not only is it challenging to find enough placements for students, 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 regional locations.

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Theme 3: Workplace learning results in a range of benefits for students – students reported many benefits from their placements, which included developing skills; making a contribution; building a professional identity; gaining confidence and networks; and sourcing employment opportunities.

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(Student)

Theme 4: CSU policy and culture supported the development of workplace learning across the institution

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.

We built on CSU's profile of professional education by investing significantly in research and reflection on workplace learning... 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.

(Staff)

Theme 5: Workplace learning builds capacity in CSU's regions

CSU has more than 13,000 work placements each year. Student data indicates CSU graduates go on to work in regional Australia, and staff data indicates that CSU academics feel a responsibility for developing and preparing their students to become professionals who are ready to work, live and make a contribution in regional communities.

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 which can have a significant Indigenous population, and often removed from their family or their friendship groups.

(Staff)

Workplace learning shapes the 21st Century student experience

Despite the challenges, students highly value their workplace learning experiences. Students come to CSU to join a profession and expect workplace learning to be part of their degree.

The benefits to CSU students include: confirming students' career direction and program choice, and maintaining their interest in their course of study. Workplace learning aids the development of students' professional identities and allows them to make contributions in their field while studying. Students gain confidence in their skills, develop professional networks and find mentors through their work placements.

The good practice highlighted by this case study is the policy framework and the deployment of technology that promotes a learning community between academic staff, students and industry supervisors.

Implications for practice

This case study demonstrates the advantage of clear institutional signals to students about which aspects of the student experience are valued and the alignment of student expectations with their experiences. It also highlights the importance of institutional investment in university-wide initiatives to benefit as many students as possible, which in turn reinforce the culture and values of the institution.

Conclusion

The innovative practice is CSU's policy decision to focus on, invest in and broaden structured workplace learning experiences across the institution. This decision was taken in response to student feedback that work placements were valued, and evidence that showed the positive impact for student engagement, retention and graduate outcomes.