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Workplace Experience of International Students in Australia

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For the past 3 years over 400,000 international students have enrolled annually to study in higher education contexts in Australia (Australian Government, 2019). The international student enrollments has been valued as Australia's third highest export industry, after coal and iron ore (Grewal & Blakkarly, 2017). Given the significance of international students, it is important that Australian universities find effective and culturally appropriate ways to support this cohort. One such area needing support is work experience, as many study programs that international students undertake include compulsory or elective courses involving assessed experiences in professional contexts. Degrees such as business, education, engineering, and health, including nursing and psychology, all require students to successfully complete workplace experiences in order to graduate. It is critical that international students are supported before, during, and after workplace components of study. The International Student Barometer indicated that international students desire quality career advice, work experience and subsequently employment as a result of their studies (Garrett, 2014).

This short essay shares brief findings from a federally funded, large-scale project carried out in Australian universities—the Work-placement for International Student Programs (WISP) project. The WISP project aimed to investigate international students' experiences in workplace contexts, but also their preparedness for such experiences. Data was collected from six universities including international student, workplace and university staff interviews; university documents; and international students' assessed reports from their work experience. In addition, a large-scale survey was also distributed across Australia, the findings of which are reported in Barton, Hartwig, and Le (2018).

Findings from the qualitative data showed that international students face different challenges in work experience as compared with their domestic counterparts. Issues such as language difference, financial difficulties, being away from usual support networks, and cultural difference related to professional skills were identified. We theorized that international students indeed encounter “multisocialization” (Barton, Hartwig, & Le, 2018), whereby they are expected to socialize into a new country, university context, and workplace environment.

Further, our extensive data showed that many workplace staff have limited capacities in cultural awareness and hence limited diverse approaches to working with, and supporting, international students. In fact, some workplace staff showed hesitation in hosting international students as they perceived them as being “hard work” (Barton, Hartwig, Joseph, & Podorova, 2017). Conversely, our data showed the success many that international students experience during work placement. For workplace staff who displayed high “ethos” (Knight, 1999), huge benefits in hosting international students were experienced for both parties.

Another major finding was that international students often find reflecting on their practice and consequently putting new practice into place challenging. Of course, this may be an issue for all students; however, our international student participants noted that reflecting on challenges and knowing how to improve action was difficult, particularly if their host was not supportive. Conversely, supportive hosts modeled good practices and worked above and beyond to support international students to success.

Recommendations from the WISP project are outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Recommendations for All Stakeholders in Relation to Work Experience for International Students

International students	University staff (includes academic support staff)	Workplace supervisors and staff
Know and use the range of support services available at your university for international students.	Organize a meeting with international students and their supervisor prior to work placement, as well as schedule postplacement sessions with university staff.	Create a welcoming workplace environment including a student work space, clear expectations, and open lines of communication.
Learn about and experience new cultural and professional contexts through volunteering.	Encourage international students to gain experience in new cultural and professional contexts through volunteering.	Embrace and utilize international students’ unique cultural knowledge and experience in your workplace.
Be involved in any university learning activities that will assist		

you to reflect and understand Australian workplace contexts.	Include a range of teaching and learning activities such as role plays, videos, and critical reflection to assist international students' understanding of Australian workplace contexts.	Include a diverse range of communication techniques to explain key concepts about the workplace context.
Participate in a community of learners by sharing your expertise, cultural knowledge, and skill sets with the university, workplace, and your peers.	Create a community of learners through multimedia to encourage communication during work placement.	Encourage international students to become involved in the wider workplace community.
Regularly seek your supervisor's feedback on your performance and ensure you understand and can implement this advice.	Share responsibility of feedback and assessment to allow a fuller understanding of the student's progress.	Provide international students regular feedback and demonstrate strategies for improvement and check for understanding.

Our project resulted in a conscious focus on positive aspects of international students' workplace experience given the negativity that is often portrayed in the literature. Such a strengths-based approach allowed us to report on ways that worked in supporting both international students and their hosts, ensuring increased employability and reflexive professionals upon graduation. Our studies, so far, have supported international students, university staff and workplace hosts to build positive partnerships in the workplace context, ensuring employability success.

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