



# THE ACPET JOURNAL FOR PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION

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The ACPET Journal for Private Higher Education is published biannually (June and December), and is currently freely available on the [ACPET website](#) .

The Journal publishes scholarly articles on the theory and practice of higher education in the context of the private sector. It provides up-to-date perspectives of benefit to educators, scholars, students, practitioners, policy-makers and consultants, and covers:

- higher education policy and practice
- teaching, learning and curriculum design
- quality assurance
- postgraduate education
- academic leadership and management
- academic work.

Articles should be a maximum of 5,000 words, and will be double-blind peer-reviewed.

Readers are also invited to submit original commentaries on current issues relevant to private higher education. Commentaries in the form of responses to articles published in prior issues of the Journal are welcome and may be considered for publication.

Commentaries should be a maximum of 3,000 words and will be reviewed by a member of the Editorial Board. The commentary may be edited to ensure it fulfils the mission of the Journal.

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ACPET would like to publicly acknowledge and thank the people listed below who served as reviewers on the Journal during 2012. Without their efforts and support, the quality of the Journal could not be sustained.

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The Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET) is Australia's national industry association for independent providers of tertiary education and training. ACPET's members offer a diverse range of higher education, vocational education, English language and foundation studies courses to Australian and overseas students across all states and territories, and increasingly across the globe.

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Following the successful release and critical recognition of the first edition of *The ACPET Journal for Private Higher Education*, it gives me great pleasure to introduce to you the second edition. This journal provides a forum for communication between researchers, educators and senior management in private higher education, as well as policy makers and consultants who have an interest in this sector. In particular, it aims to nurture research skills among teaching staff in private institutions, because research enhances teaching, and vice versa, teaching enlivens and sustains research.

In this issue we are presenting two new features for our journal. First, we have introduced a commentary section aimed at promoting debate and discussion about current issues in higher education. Commentaries in the form of responses to articles published in prior issues of the Journal are also welcome and may be considered for publication. We encourage our readers to submit original commentaries on relevant issues, and priority will be given to contributions which are substantial, lively, original, and have a broad appeal.

The second new feature introduced in this issue is the offer made to our readers and their organisations to access the growing private higher education sector in Australia and beyond by advertising their services and products in the journal. I encourage you to consider this opportunity and support this great initiative.

This issue of our journal contains a selection of topics and some controversial comments and opinions.

The opening commentary by Andrew Norton adds to the public discussion raised by his recent report *Graduate Winners* released by the Grattan Institute. Andrew's challenging proposal for a reduction of tuition subsidies to universities brings out some interesting implications for the private higher education sector.

The further four articles in this edition cover a range of contemporary and significant issues relevant to private higher education.

Tran's article brings into focus the much-debated topic of plagiarism and international students, a highly significant issue in global higher education, and particularly in the Australian context.

Nair, Bennett and Shah's paper provides insights into why students choose to study at private institutions and examines the student experience in five Australian private higher education institutions.

The study conducted by Dunworth, Fiocco and Mulligan into the transition of students from a diploma course into a mainstream university undergraduate program investigates the issues that relate to successful transition from the perspective of the students themselves.

Zahra and Pavia's action-based research project undertaken in New Zealand in the area of work-integrated learning (WIL) presents a new model for enhancing students' learning experience and facilitating graduate employability skills.

I hope that these informative articles will provide you with thought-provoking insights, and that they will stimulate your own interest in researching and submitting your own articles for future issues of our journal.

I take this opportunity to thank the members of the ACPET Journal's Editorial Board, the Reviewers and the Editor, Dr Laura Hougaz, for their valuable contribution in ensuring the journal's high level of quality and encouraging readers to support the journal.



**Claire Field**  
Chief Executive Officer



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# Commentary. Higher Education Tuition Subsidies: An Unnecessary Public Expense?



Andrew Norton  
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## Abstract

Higher education tuition subsidies will cost the Commonwealth Government about \$6 billion in 2012–13. Given that higher education's private benefits are likely to attract students with lower or no tuition subsidies, it is not clear that this level of spending is justifiable. The restriction of tuition subsidies to public universities also has the effect of distorting the higher education market in their favour. A phasing-down of tuition subsidies would be a better way of removing or reducing market distortions than extending tuition subsidies to private higher education providers. As well as lowering, rather than increasing the cost to taxpayers, it would avoid exposing private higher education providers to unnecessary regulation and regulatory risk.

In the period 2012–13, Australia will spend about \$6 billion subsidising higher education coursework. Policy changes will help push this to nearly \$7 billion by 2015–16. In particular, from 2012 public universities have few limits on the number of domestic undergraduates they can enrol with Commonwealth subsidies. However, private universities and non-university higher education providers can access subsidies only through special deals with the Commonwealth Government. Unsurprisingly, their representative organisations have called for subsidies to be distributed on a non-discriminatory basis.

The recent Grattan Institute paper, *Graduate winners: Assessing the public and private benefits of higher education*, suggested, however, that these tuition subsidies were often difficult to justify. A phase-down of tuition subsidies to public universities is an alternative way of creating a more equal higher education market.

## Keywords

tuition subsidies, public benefit, private benefit, private higher education

## The Current System

Most domestic students studying at Australian higher education providers are in Commonwealth-supported places (CSPs). About 99 per cent of CSPs are in public universities listed in Table A of the *Higher Education Support Act 2003*. Although the Commonwealth Government retains the right to cap CSP numbers at public universities, as of August 2012 no caps apply except for courses in medicine, courses leading to sub-bachelor or postgraduate awards, and for the University of Melbourne and the University of Western Australia. For higher education providers (HEPs) that do not appear in Table A, CSPs

are available only when specifically approved in “national priority” areas, as declared by the Commonwealth education minister. Of the approximately 130 non-Table A HEPs, just seven have CSPs, with the majority of places at the University of Notre Dame. The selective nature of CSP allocation has been criticised by both a government-commissioned policy review and the affected interest groups (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008; ACPET, 2011; CoPHE, 2011).

For each CSP, the HEP receives a subsidy from the Commonwealth Government paid out of the Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS). Subsidy levels depend on field of study,

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as shown in Table 1. These are called “Commonwealth contributions”. In addition, HEPs can charge a “student contribution” up to a maximum set by the government. In practice, they almost always charge the maximum amount. Adding the Commonwealth and student contributions together gives the total funding rate received by HEPs (DIISRTE, 2012).

Table 1 shows the CSP funding rates for 2012. Students can borrow the student contribution through the HECS-HELP student loan scheme. They do not need to repay their debt if their income is too low. In 2012–13 the threshold for repayment is \$49,000.

The total cost of the CGS is expected to be about \$6 billion in 2012–13, rising to nearly \$7 billion by 2015–16. The HELP loan scheme and student income support will bring the total to more than \$11 billion in 2015–16 (DIISRTE, 2012).

On average, taxpayers will nominally incur about 60 per cent of the cost of educating CSP students, and students will pay the remaining 40 per cent. As can be seen from Table 1, the percentage of the total funding rate paid by the public varies by discipline. The underlying funding rates and respective Commonwealth and student contributions have frequently been criticised. In response to these criticisms, the Commonwealth Government commissioned a funding review, which reported in late 2011 (Lomax-Smith, Watson, & Webster, 2011). In addition to recommending some ad hoc changes to the funding rates, the Lomax-Smith review suggested a flat 60/40 payment, that is, 60 per cent of each discipline’s total funding rate to be paid by the Commonwealth Government and the remaining 40 per cent to be paid by the student.

## The Rationale for Public Funding

Although the evolution of the current public funding system can be explained, it lacks a clear public policy rationale. The total funding rate is descended from a review of expenditure conducted more than 20 years ago. The student contribution is roughly based on relative expected future private earnings. For example, law, medicine, dentistry, and veterinary science — occupations with high average earnings — have the most expensive student contributions. Humanities, nursing and teaching — courses that typically do not lead to high salaries — have less expensive student contributions. The Commonwealth Government contribution is what is left after deducting the student contribution from the total funding rate. It is the only one of the three numbers that has no empirical basis.

The Lomax-Smith review suggested a radical conceptual change to higher education public funding. Although the reasoning in the Lomax-Smith report is hard to follow, its

**Table 1:**

*Annual funding rate for Commonwealth-supported places (2012; students taking out HELP loan).*

Field of Study	Student \$	Government \$	Total funding rate \$	Public contribution %
Mathematics, statistics	4,520	12,641	<b>17,161</b>	74
Science	4,520	19,482	<b>24,002</b>	81
Humanities	5,648	5,168	<b>10,816</b>	48
Behavioural science, social studies	5,648	9,142	<b>14,790</b>	62
Education	5,648	9,512	<b>15,160</b>	63
Clinical psychology, allied health, foreign languages, visual and performing arts	5,648	11,243	<b>16,891</b>	67
Nursing	5,648	12,552	<b>18,200</b>	69
Computing, built environment, other health	8,050	9,142	<b>17,192</b>	53
Engineering, surveying	8,050	15,983	<b>24,033</b>	67
Agriculture	8,050	20,284	<b>28,334</b>	72
Law, accounting, economics, commerce	9,425	1,861	<b>11,286</b>	16
Medicine, dentistry, veterinary science	9,425	20,284	<b>29,709</b>	68

*Note: If students pay upfront they receive a 10 per cent discount. The government pays the value of the discount to the student’s university. In these cases, the government’s share of total contributions is larger than shown in this table.*

*Source: DEEWR, 2012.*

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conclusion was that the Commonwealth Government should pay through tuition subsidies the expected future value of higher education's public benefits. These include financial benefits such as increased tax revenues and non-financial benefits such as more volunteering, tolerance and civic engagement. On the numbers presented in the Lomax-Smith report, the value of these public benefits was equivalent to about 60 per cent of the average overall annual funding rate for a CSP. This is why the authors of the review came up with the 60 per cent/40 per cent formula. In this formula, it is the student contribution that has no empirical basis. It is just what is left over after the Commonwealth Government pays 60 per cent of the funding rate. More details on the Lomax-Smith analysis and recommendations are available in the Grattan Institute's report, *Graduate winners: Assessing the public and private benefits of higher education* (Norton, 2012a, section 3).

This report proposes a more rigorous approach to higher education public expenditure. The core argument is that public expenditure can be justified when it is likely to produce public benefits that would not otherwise be produced. In most cases, this will be when some specific skill may otherwise be "under-produced" relative to community or labour market needs. However, it is also possible that more general graduate skills or attributes may be under-supplied. If sufficient numbers of graduates would be produced without public subsidy, then that money could be better spent on other programs or returned to taxpayers through tax cuts. In this framework, institutional history in the public or private sector is irrelevant — what matters is the institution's capacity to produce the desired outcomes.

The idea that graduates might be under-produced stems from a "market failure" analysis. Sometimes markets produce less than an optimal amount of some good or service. The optimal level includes considering both public and private benefits. However, prospective students may consider only the private benefits.

For example, they might consider how interesting they find a particular subject, the kind of job they hope to get on graduation, and how much money they are likely to earn. These private benefits can be compared with the cost of education, in terms of tuition charges and time spent out of the workforce. However, prospective students are unlikely to consider the benefits others will receive if they go to university, such as more tax revenue, the filling of a skills gap (other than its impact on their own employment prospects), higher volunteering levels, or greater toleration of others.

If a prospective student believes that the private costs are too high relative to the private benefits, he or she may decide against continuing on to higher education. But where the public benefits would have justified further education, a sub-optimal result of under-education will occur. Consequently,

there is a potential role for government in encouraging higher education enrolment.

Tuition subsidies are one way of making higher education more attractive to students. By reducing higher education's private cost, tuition subsidies improve its net private benefits (total benefits less total costs). Tuition subsidies almost always make students better off. However, tuition subsidies only sometimes make the general public better off. That occurs when tuition subsidies cause additional public benefits, and the public benefits are worth more than the tuition subsidies. Where the public benefits would have been produced anyway, due to high private benefits, the public does not get anything additional from its investment. All the public subsidy does is make students or graduates more affluent than would otherwise have been the case.

There are two main ways of checking whether or not private benefits alone are likely to be enough to create incentives for students to take a course. We can investigate the evidence on private benefits, and make inferences about whether we believe that they are sufficient to attract students. And we can look at actual behaviour, through course applications and enrolments.

## Assessing Private Benefits

Although the idea that on average graduates are typically better off than non-graduates is rarely contested, measuring the private benefits of higher education is not straightforward. People who go on to higher education are not a random group in the community. Given the selection processes for higher education, they already have above-average academic ability, and are also likely to have other attributes associated with academic achievement such as self-control. People with these characteristics are likely to do better in life than those without them, irrespective of whether they continue their education. One method of accounting for these characteristics is to find a comparison group thought to be more similar to students or graduates than the average non-student or graduate. For example, the financial analysis that follows compares graduates with the median person who finished school at Year 12, but who did not continue with their education.

Another difficulty in analysing higher education's private benefits is that they vary significantly between graduates. So while most graduates do well, some do not. Where the risk of not doing well is high, it would be rational for prospective students to be wary of further study.

## Financial Private Benefits

One way of assessing the private financial benefits of higher education is to calculate an internal rate of return (for an

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explanation, see Weidmann and Norton, 2012a). In this analysis, initial costs are tuition charges, other education costs such as text books, and forgone wages from time spent out of the workforce. The financial benefits are the future earnings of a bachelor-degree graduate in excess of those of the median person of the same sex who leaves school at Year 12 without further education. Table 2 assumes an 18-year-old school leaver who works to age 65 (see Weidmann and Norton, 2012b for an analysis assuming education starts at age 30).

The key difference between this analysis and previously published work (such as Daly, Lewis, Corliss, and Heaslip, 2012) is that it looks at the impact of varying the level of student charges. It is therefore designed to see what impact tuition subsidies have on the real lifetime economics of higher education. In Table 2, the column labelled “HECS-HELP” shows the internal rate of return with the subsidy levels prevailing in 2006 (the census year used for the income data) which, with a few exceptions, are broadly similar to those shown in Table 1. Column 3 labelled “Full CSP rates” shows the internal rate of return without any tuition subsidy, but with total charges still capped by government. Column 4 shows the internal rate of return on average international student fees. In all cases, except agriculture and science, these fees are higher than the full CSP rate, and usually significantly higher.

Table 2 shows that the initial level of student charges makes only a small difference to the financial attractiveness of a bachelor degree. For both sexes, the tuition subsidy on average decreases the median internal rate of return by one percentage point. Free higher education (column 1) increases the internal rate of return by two percentage points. The reason for this is that the level of tuition charge is never as important as future income. Because earnings in most disciplines are very high compared with the initial costs, the rates of return are almost always good. Where the rates of return are low — as in the performing arts and, to a lesser extent, in the humanities — abolishing all tuition subsidies does not make the investment an attractive one, from a financial point of view. The key financial problem in these disciplines is that employment and earnings prospects are poor.

The internal rate of return was calculated at the median — that is, for someone in the middle of the income distribution who is of a given sex with a given qualification. But we are also interested in knowing the risk of not coming out ahead, given the person’s gender and qualification. This was calculated by dividing up the graduates into income deciles, so that someone at or below the 1st decile (or 10th percentile) is in the bottom 10 per cent of the income distribution, ranging up to the 9th decile, which puts the graduate in the top 10 per cent of the income distribution for their qualification. This analysis can be used to calculate the

Table 2:

Internal rates of return on higher education investment.

		Median Rate of Return			
Discipline	Gender	1 “Free” education %	2 HECS- HELP %	3 FULL-CSP rates %	4 International student fees %
Agriculture	F	12	11	11	10
	M	13	11	9	9
Architecture	F	11	10	10	10
	M	9	8	7	7
Commerce	F	27	25	25	24
	M	22	21	20	19
Dentistry	F	26	23	22	22
	M	28	25	24	23
Education	F	20	18	18	18
	M	16	14	13	13
Engineering	F	23	21	20	20
	M	21	19	18	18
Humanities	F	10	10	10	9
	M	5	4	3	3
IT	F	25	23	23	22
	M	21	20	19	18
Law	F	29	27	27	26
	M	24	22	22	22
Medicine	F	21	19	19	19
	M	20	18	17	17
Nursing	F	31	28	28	28
	M	26	23	21	21
Performing arts	F	6	6	6	5
	M	**	**	**	**
Sciences (excl. maths)	F	16	15	15	14
	M	12	11	11	10
<b>Bachelor degree average</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>15</b>
	<b>M</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>13</b>

Source: ABS Census 2006 and sources referred to in Weidmann and Norton, 2012a.

Note: \*\* Indicates negative returns.

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**Table 3:**

*Risk of not benefiting financially from a bachelor degree, by discipline and tuition cost.*

Proportion not financially better off than the median person with Year 12 only education					
Discipline	Gender	1 "Free" education %	2 HECS- HELP %	3 FULL-CSP rates %	4 International student fees %
Agriculture	F	40	40	40	40
	M	40	40	40	40
Architecture	F	40	40	40	40
	M	30	30	40	40
Commerce	F	30	30	30	30
	M	30	30	30	30
Dentistry	F	30	30	30	30
	M	20	20	20	20
Education	F	30	30	30	30
	M	30	30	30	30
Engineering	F	40	40	40	40
	M	30	30	30	30
Humanities	F	40	40	40	40
	M	50	50	50	50
IT	F	30	30	30	30
	M	30	30	30	30
Law	F	20	20	20	20
	M	20	20	20	20
Medicine	F	20	20	20	20
	M	10	10	10	10
Nursing	F	30	30	30	30
	M	30	30	30	30
Performing arts	F	50	50	50	50
	M	60	60	60	60
Sciences (excl. maths)	F	40	40	40	40
	M	30	30	40	40
<b>Bachelor degree average</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>30</b>
	<b>M</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>30</b>

Source: ABS Census 2006 and sources referred to in Weidmann and Norton, 2012a.

risk of not coming out ahead financially from an investment in higher education.

Census data has an important limitation for risk analysis. It is a snapshot in time that does not track the same people as they age. We have to infer longer-term results from current outcomes. For example, the risk analysis assumes that someone in the lowest 10 per cent of earnings in August 2006 will remain there throughout their career. In reality, people move in and out of the full-time labour force, and have jobs with varying pay levels. Due to these fluctuations, the risk of any one individual not benefiting financially from their education is probably lower than our figures suggest.

With this caveat, Table 3 shows that the average risk of not coming out ahead financially on a bachelor degree is 30 per cent. To phrase it positively, 70 out of 100 bachelor-degree holders recover the initial costs of their education and earn more than the median person who finished their education at Year 12. If only full-time workers are included, 85 per cent of bachelor-degree graduates are financially better off than the median person who finished their education at Year 12. As with the rate-of-return analysis, the tuition subsidy makes little difference to risk — what matters is how well graduates do in the labour market.

## Non-financial Benefits of Higher Education

Most research into higher education's private financial benefits — including the analysis above — counts the years spent at university as a financial cost. Full-time students forgo income and incur expenses for three or four years, in the hope of benefits later on. However, not all of higher education's benefits are postponed. For many students, higher education is a valuable experience in itself.

Higher education is not just a route to a job. It is the start of long-term engagement with a subject that most students find interesting. Indeed, satisfying interests rated slightly more highly than job factors in a survey of first-year students. Their most important reasons for enrolling were "studying in a field that really interests me" (96%), "improving my job prospects" (86%), "developing my interests and creative abilities" (77%), and "to get training for a specific job" (75%) (James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010, p. 18).

Rating interests above jobs is consistent with students deliberately choosing courses without clear vocational pathways. Able students who could choose more remunerative courses take humanities or creative arts courses of out of interest (Table 4). For example, the top 10 per cent of students enrolling in language and literature courses had an ATAR of at

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least 97, putting them in the top three per cent of their age cohort by academic ability. This behaviour cannot be explained by a desire to maximise future income.

**Table 4:**

*Student ATARs in humanities and creative arts.*

Field of study	Median	90th percentile
Political science and policy studies	88	98
Studies in human society	86	97
Philosophy and religious studies	77	94
Language and literature	83	97
Performing arts	83	95
Visual arts and crafts	82	93

Source: DEEWR special data request.

When students pursue their interests, it is a “consumption” benefit of higher education — something they enjoy now, rather than an investment in future income. A survey of Year 12 students planning on going to university overwhelmingly responded positively to the proposition that their preferred field of study looked like a “fun subject to study” (Roy Morgan Research 2009, Table 28). A study that tracked young people from Year 9 at school to their mid-20s found that those who would eventually complete an undergraduate degree were happier than other young people until around age 23, when their happiness declined to around the average for the whole group (Dockery, 2010). At least for school-leaver university students, their university years are good. They study something that interests them, and often have plenty of free time for socialising and pursuing other goals.

## Demand for Higher Education

Given the high private benefits of higher education, and the modest risks, it is not obvious that tuition subsidies have significant work to do in making higher education more financially attractive for career-oriented students with reasonable school results. Subsidies are likely to have greater influence on people studying purely out of interest, with a

weak interest in higher education (significant minorities of commencing students say they are just marking time) and people at high risk of non-completion, such as those with weak school results (Norton, 2012a, pp. 76–77). As these students are also less likely to end up producing public benefits, their reactions are less important from a public policy perspective than students with clear career aspirations.

Within the career-oriented group, which is the group of most concern in this paper, tuition charges may still exert an influence on whether prospective students apply for higher education. Many prospective students would have only a partial understanding of the costs and benefits of studying. Some may incorrectly conclude that fees are so high that study is not in their financial interests, or prospective students may have a preference for short- to medium-term consumption over long-term consumption (under the HELP loan scheme, take-home incomes are reduced for an average of eight years while debt repayment occurs).

To understand whether changes in price would lead to changes in the number of people applying to university, we need to understand how responsive students actually are to student charges (regardless of how charges affect the underlying economics).

A full-fee private higher education sector shows that at least some students do not need tuition subsidies to attract them to higher education, although the FEE-HELP income contingent loan scheme has helped increase enrolments (Ryan, 2012). The public university system has also very successfully expanded full-fee enrolments since deregulation for international students and domestic postgraduates began in the late 1980s. By 2010, these students paid about \$5 billion in fees to public universities (DEEWR, 2011). The tuition fee income of private HEPs was at least \$840 million in 2010 (Norton, 2012b, p. 34). Full-fee students were at least 38 per cent of Australian higher education enrolments in 2011 (not all private HEPs are in the national student statistical collection).

The history of changes to student contributions also gives us a guide to higher education price sensitivity. Major changes to student charges occurred in 1989, 1997 and 2005. At the time of the last two changes, applications were already trending down, which complicates analysis. However, there is a pattern of demand dropping slightly when student charges go up, and then recovering. Possibly adverse publicity surrounding the political decision to increase charges has an initial effect, but this fades with time and prospective student decision-making goes back to normal. In the Australian system up until 2012 demand always exceeded supply for CSPs, so the public universities had little incentive to correct mistaken views about the affordability of higher education. Indeed, by opposing

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changes to public subsidies rather than emphasising the personal value of a degree they may have contributed to these mistaken views.

## Policy Implications

Given the strong private benefits of higher education, and evidence that the market is willing to pay higher charges than currently prevail for Commonwealth-supported students, there is room for reducing tuition subsidies. Changes should be announced and phased in, so that students and higher education providers can make plans knowing the likely future funding levels. Phasing-in allows policy to be amended, should student responses to the new prices vary significantly from expectations.

The risk of adverse outcomes differs between disciplines, and therefore tuition subsidy changes should vary between disciplines in their size and speed. The *Graduate winners* report provides a framework for thinking about subsidy levels (Norton, 2012a). If public benefits are low, then that field of study is a candidate for relatively large and quick cuts. The risk of lost public benefits is by definition minimal. In disciplines that do produce significant public benefits, the additional issues in the framework need to be analysed.

The larger the private benefits, the lower the chance that there will be any major drop in demand. If a course has high private benefits, it will look good compared with any likely alternative. In the context of patterns of higher education demand, how the course in question compares with other courses drawing on applicants with similar interests is particularly important. Applications data needs to be routinely monitored so that policymakers have recent and reliable data on higher education sub-markets.

Workforce skills shortages and skill forecasting data can be used in combination with higher education demand data to see which courses need to maintain or increase their supply. Where demand for higher education places is strong relative to the likely need for graduates, there is less public benefit risk in a demand downturn.

## Implications for Private Higher Education Providers

Some private higher education providers (HEPs) have sought a “more level playing field”, to be achieved by extending CSPs to them, as recommended by the Bradley funding review. However, an alternative route to a more level playing field is for the Table A universities to lose some or all of their tuition subsidies. This would not necessarily make private HEPs cheaper than public universities. Especially in the low

tuition subsidy business area (see Table 1) many private HEPs would cost more than Table A universities even if they could lower their prices by the current Commonwealth contribution amount. However, a price increase by Table A universities would enhance the perceived relative value for money offered by private HEP courses.

Although cutting tuition subsidies is politically difficult, given a tight overall fiscal situation, the current government or a future government is likely to consider reducing higher education costs. A policy of putting all higher education providers on an equal funding basis that saves money would appeal to government more than one that costs money.

It is also important that the private higher education sector is not exposed to the regulation and regulatory risk attached to Commonwealth funding. A corollary of tuition subsidies not making private HEPs cheaper than Table A universities is that private HEPs have higher revenue per student. In most institutions, this is likely to be important to maintaining a distinctive form of higher education, especially lower staff-to-student ratios. Yet tuition subsidies under the current

**The larger the private benefits, the lower the chance that there will be any major drop in demand.**

regulatory system would also require price capping, and lower per student revenue. It would be a great loss to the Australian higher education system if the distinctiveness of private HEPs was lost through price capping. Private HEPs also need to be aware that a future government may save money in higher education by capping

student numbers. As noted in earlier, two public universities are already capped. This would pose a significant business risk to private HEPs.

A final consideration is the long-term effect on institutional culture of access to the public funding system. In the public university system, government funding has created a strong orientation towards rent-seeking rather than on providing a quality education which students are willing to purchase. The reaction of Universities Australia to *Graduate winners* was a case in point. It ignored the substantial evidence of private benefits to students and graduates presented in the report, even though this ought to be a substantial selling point for prospective students. Instead, Universities Australia focused on pointing out claimed public benefits that it hopes its principal client, the Commonwealth Government, will fund. Given their history of operating in a very competitive and student-oriented market, it is unlikely that the private HEPs would ever fully adopt the approach advocated by Universities Australia. Private HEPs have succeeded by focusing on students, not the

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state. This, and not lobbying government for public funding, is the long-term key to a successful higher education business.

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# The Perceptions and Attitudes of International Students Towards Plagiarism



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## Abstract

Concern about plagiarism and academic dishonesty among international students studying in Western institutions has emerged in the academic literature. Debates about the reasons leading to the increased number of students breaking the academic integrity rules are lively in many academic forums. Some researchers have linked plagiarism with cultural norms, values and behaviours, identifying culture as the reason for the tendency to plagiarise among international students.

This study argues that culture is not decisive in shaping students' understanding and attitude towards referencing and plagiarism. It involves an action research project undertaken with international students enrolled in a diploma program at La Trobe Melbourne and suggests that plagiarism is the outcome of complex personal and situational factors. Students' English proficiency, the inherent writing style in their home country, their motivation, their learning style (passive or active), together with the different approaches to referencing adopted by different teachers, appear to be the key factors that significantly affect students' ways of managing citing and referencing in their own work. These factors need to be taken into consideration in the design of activities aimed at familiarising international students with the issue of academic integrity in Western institutions and providing them with adequate support to be able to manage it.

## Keywords

plagiarism, referencing, higher education, international education, cultural factors

## Introduction

There has been considerable attention given to the issue of plagiarism in higher education recently. Plagiarism, defined by the Oxford Dictionary (2012) as "the practice of taking someone else's work or ideas and passing them off as one's own", is considered as an issue of academic dishonesty (East, 2010) and is often explicitly mentioned in the academic policies of Western institutions. Despite the efforts of different institutions to help students be aware of and avoid plagiarism, there still exists a concern that plagiarism in higher education is increasing across the board (East, 2010; Hayes & Introna, 2005; Zimitat, 2012).

The increasing numbers of international students studying in Western institutions have been accompanied by a growing unease about plagiarism among those students. The students often come from different cultural backgrounds and have learning styles different from those encountered in the West.

They are also considered to be more likely to plagiarise by lecturers and researchers in the West (East, 2010). There have been many articles investigating why tertiary students in general, and international students in particular, plagiarise. First, the development of information technology has provided students with easily accessible material on the internet and has made it easier for them to commit plagiarism, but also "made it easier to detect this practice of academic dishonesty" (Comas-Forgas & Sureda-Negre, 2010, p. 228). Second, students may not actually understand what plagiarism entails (Carroll, 2002). There is also a lack of clarity about what constitutes plagiarism and how it is detected (Angéil-Carter, 2000; Biggs, 1994). Moreover, language barriers and the differences in learning styles are considered to be major reasons for plagiarism among international students (Angéil-Carter, 2000; Bretag, Horrocks, & Smith, 2002; Carroll, 2002; Handa & Power, 2005; MacKinnon & Manathunga, 2003; Park, 2003; Pennycook, 1996; Sowden, 2005). It has also been

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suggested that many international students hold a different moral perception of plagiarism and its significance compared with the perception held in the West (Bamford & Sergiou, 2005; Introna, Hayes, Blair, & Wood, 2003). Many students come from countries where “learning and assessment typically focus on the content of a text book” (Hayes & Introna, 2005, p. 215), so it does not seem to be easy for them to be critical or to raise their own opinions, tending to copy ideas from books and other sources instead (Handa & Power, 2005; Pennycook, 1996). Some researchers have linked plagiarism and cultural norms, values and behaviours (Carroll, 2004; Hayes & Introna, 2005; Sowden, 2005), and culture<sup>1</sup> is given as the reason for the tendency to plagiarise among international students in Western institutions.

Liu (2005) and Phan Le Ha (2006) accept culture as one influencing factor for the high incidence of plagiarism among international students. But they, especially Liu, argue strongly that the claims of “plagiarism or copying others’ writing” as an acceptable practice in the Far East are “dubious”, because these claims were built on inaccurate or unreliable information (Liu, 2005, p. 234). Both Liu and Phan Le Ha assert that plagiarism is not acceptable either in Vietnam or in China, two countries with a very high number of students in Western institutions. They conclude that plagiarism is largely the result of “insufficient training in academic writing” and of the “ignorance of students’ language, culture, identity, education and knowledge” (Phan Le Ha, 2006, p. 77), or is due to the insufficient guidance given to students with concepts and ideas with which they are not familiar (Liu, 2005).

Liu also claims that the tendency to dwell on the issue of plagiarism and cultural stereotypes does not allow much room for examination of pedagogical implications. Instead, she suggests:

In dealing with ESOL students’ plagiarism, it seems better to focus on students’ language and writing development rather than to dwell on issues that are not only debatable but also have few direct pedagogical implications  
(Liu, 2005, p. 240).

Liu’s argument has gained support from many other authors in the area who suggest that students who come from a different culture and who have different learning styles may need help to understand and overcome the cultural differences (Comas-Forgas & Sureda-Negre, 2010; Gourlay & Deane, 2012; Leask, 2006; Phan Le Ha, 2006; Sowden, 2005; Tran Thi Tuyet, 2012).

1 The “customary beliefs and values that ethnic, religious, and social groups transmit fairly unchanged from generation to generation” (Sapientza, Zingales, & Guiso, 2006, p. 2).

## The Study

This study aims to report the views of plagiarism among students enrolled in Foundations of Management (FOM), a core subject in the Diploma in Business Administration at La Trobe Melbourne<sup>2</sup>. The student cohort has a high number of students from countries as diverse as China, Vietnam, Thailand, Japan, Oman and Saudi Arabia. With the strong belief that these students need timely support and clear, step-by-step guidance to learn to manage the issue of plagiarism in their writing, an action research project was designed in which the content of citation and referencing was explicitly taught in the program of the FOM subject. This study was conducted during a 13-week trimester (from 27 February to 1 June, 2012). There were 115 students enrolled in the FOM subject in that trimester and the group was divided into four classes, with two teachers in charge of two classes each. This study aimed to report the students’ understanding of, and attitudes towards plagiarism after specific training on what constitutes plagiarism and why and how to avoid it, and after the requirements for citation and referencing had all been made explicit.

An action research study was conducted to integrate theory into practice. Moreover, as “knowledge comes from doing” (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003, p. 14), action research can go beyond the notion that “theory can inform practice”. It can also allow theory to be generated through practice (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003; Greenwood, 2002). In this specific research, a study was designed where theory could both inform practice and be generated through practice. On the one hand, a course was designed to provide students with sufficient training and support to assist them in understanding and avoiding plagiarism in their writing. On the other hand, this study also aimed to investigate further challenges facing students as well as students’ attitudes towards the issue of plagiarism.

In this project, in order to acknowledge students’ “language, culture, identity, education and knowledge” (Phan Le Ha, 2006, p. 77), the referencing requirements in assignments were made explicit and prompt responses to students’ queries were also provided. The requirements for students’ tasks were also made very clear at the beginning of the course. Students were required to write one essay of 600 words and another of 1,500 words. They were also required to cite at least four academic journal articles for the first assignment and eight journal articles and one book for the second. The use of websites was not allowed. Students were **required to cite all** references using the Harvard referencing style.

2 Operated and owned by the global education provider Navitas, La Trobe Melbourne is the on-campus pathway offering Diplomas allowing students to then articulate to second year of a range of Bachelor degrees at La Trobe University. La Trobe Melbourne also offers Foundation Studies and ELICOS courses.

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The mark allocated for referencing was 10 per cent and 15 per cent, respectively, of the total marks for each essay.

Referencing styles and the recognition and avoidance of plagiarism were explicitly taught by the FOM teachers. During tutorial sessions, the teachers taught students how to find articles, how to find relevant information in academic journals, how to paraphrase ideas, and how to quote directly from a source. In addition to the assistance from the FOM teachers, students could also seek help from the Academic Skills Adviser (ASA) who provided one-to-one consultations. Students could make appointments with the ASA to improve their writing and citation skills. When “at risk” students were identified, the teachers often referred these students to see the ASA for more help. The ASA also organised a few workshops on the Harvard referencing style, on academic writing skills and on citation practice. In these workshops, students were offered the opportunity to gain a clear understanding of what was considered plagiarism and how it could be avoided. The students were also provided with the opportunity to practise citing material from academic journals and receive prompt feedback from the ASA.

This study was conducted using two methods, a survey of the responses from 72 students and a focus group interview with eight students at the end of the 13-week course. Another source of data was the researcher’s field notes taken during informal discussions with students when they consulted the ASA to obtain feedback regarding referencing during the trimester.

## Results

One of the most encouraging results of this study was that no student in this course was subsequently accused of plagiarism. With explicit instruction, guidance and support, students all seemed to understand that when citing the ideas of others, the source had to be acknowledged. According to the survey results, 78 per cent of the students reported that at the commencement of their study in this course they had no idea what was required in terms of referencing and had little understanding of what constituted plagiarism. By the end of the course, all of the students had practised various forms of quoting, paraphrasing and referencing in writing their assignments. Most of them started to develop a sense of academic writing and referencing style. Some active students did not limit their study to attending classes with the teachers but often sought additional assistance from the ASA and brought with them many questions regarding referencing and the writing of academic essays in English. Thus, 22 per cent of the students who had no understanding about referencing at the beginning of the course gained high marks for referencing even for the first assignment. They made great progress in their writing and, by the end of the

course, appeared to be confident in ensuring they did not plagiarise. These students often reported the reason for their increased understanding of these issues and their high marks for referencing as being due to: “worked hard”, “followed the guide”, “frequent practice”, “carefully checked the writing and referencing”, and “good preparation”. It seemed that the support and guidance provided during the course did help these students build their confidence in mastering their English writing and in avoiding plagiarism.

However, most students who had high marks for their assignments and for their referencing were quite good at English when they began the course. Ninety per cent of the students who had high marks for referencing stated that understanding English was not a significant problem for them. However, although they attained high marks for referencing, most of these students reported that referencing requirements were difficult to understand and that the availability of ongoing support was still very important for them. These students were also the ones who often visited the ASA. They knew that support was available and tried to make full use of it. However, this was not the case

**One of the most encouraging results of this study was that no student in this course was subsequently accused of plagiarism.**

with all students. By the end of the course, many students still needed a great deal of assistance to manage referencing in their assignments. Their understanding of referencing and their writing skills remained very limited. The survey results and the data

from the focus group interviews indicated the following problems in students’ writing and referencing.

*“Referencing is too difficult, or my English writing skills are too bad”*

This is a common comment made by many students attending this course. Forty-five per cent of the students surveyed indicated that they still did not believe they could write a good essay and manage referencing correctly. At the end of the course some students reported that they were still not sure what plagiarism meant and how this word was pronounced. The students attending the focus group interview indicated that they often focused on the requirements of the essays, specified in assessment criteria, where accurate referencing was awarded 10 per cent or 15 per cent of the total marks for the essay. Thus, the entire cohort knew what referencing meant and mostly they knew what was required, but plagiarism remained an unfamiliar word for some of them. Although students could gain support for citation and

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referencing both in class and out of class, 68 per cent received low or very low marks for their citations and referencing.

One obvious reason for the prevalence of the range of referencing skills, as suggested by the results of the survey and in the focus group interviews, was the proficiency in English and the level of skills that students had at the beginning of the course. Poor English skills hampered students' progress and although they were provided with the key words and techniques to search relevant academic journals, many students could not find the articles needed to support their assignments. Even when specific articles were suggested by the FOM teachers or the ASA, some students could not understand the content of the articles, and did not know what information they should cite or how to put the ideas expressed in those articles into their own writing. Thus, when they were asked to give the reasons for their low marks, they often said that "I didn't know how to write essay and do referencing", or "My references were all wrong". Furthermore, because of poor English writing skills, some students tended to copy the references from the original text without understanding that that text used a different referencing style.

The level of English proficiency is a key factor in understanding referencing and plagiarism issues among international students. Many students with low marks often found referencing difficult. According to these students, their low marks were the result of their poor English. Obviously, language barriers and poor English skills were real obstacles in these students' attempts to understand and master citation and referencing and in their overall ability to cope with the requirements of the course (Bretag et al., 2002; Handa & Power, 2005; MacKinnon & Manathunga, 2003; Park, 2003; Pennycook, 1996).

The evidence of the language barrier seemed even clearer in the cases of students who made great efforts to accommodate the requirements of the subject but still faced significant challenges in citing ideas accurately and crediting the sources of the ideas appropriately. Some students were referred to see the ASA because 50 per cent to 70 per cent of their essays was in the form of direct quotations. The reason they gave for over quoting was that the original ideas were too "dense" and they did not know how to paraphrase or summarise those ideas. Some students made an attempt to paraphrase, but did not succeed because they changed only a few words in a complex sentence which they were clearly not capable of writing themselves. One student complained:

I found it very hard to change [to paraphrase] the original ideas. I have problems of understanding fully the ideas. Besides, my vocabulary is limited. How can I change them [the authors' ideas]?

*"Referencing is so confusing!"*

There were also instances where students found it hard to manage plagiarism not because of their lack of English skills, but because of the different ways in which the teacher viewed what should be considered plagiarism. One student stated that:

I used some sentences in the teacher's handouts then she told me that I cannot do so because that is also considered plagiarism, but when I used the ideas she wrote on the board, she didn't say anything. I am so confused. I don't know what plagiarism really is.

Similarly, another student asked the ASA for clarification on when she could copy an idea without referencing. This is what she had to say:

In Law, we had an open book test, so we need to know where to find information for specific questions. I worked very hard before the test, that's why I could find information to answer questions in the test, but then my mark was not high. I came to see my teacher and

**The level of English proficiency is a key factor in understanding referencing and plagiarism issues among international students.**

she explained to me that I cannot copy information from the book, I have to change it into my own words. No one had told me about this before. In my country, copy information from text-book is absolutely acceptable.

In summary, there was a group of students who appeared to understand why and how they should acknowledge other people's ideas. They also understood that referencing is an essential part of academic writing, although they themselves found the practice difficult because of different approaches to referencing adopted by different teachers. Furthermore, some students had an understanding of plagiarism that did not seem to fit with English writing practice. This is not cultural perception as suggested by Carroll (2004), Hayes and Introna (2005), and Sowden (2005), it should be viewed as a difference in writing conventions between their own languages and English.

*"I need more time, help and guidance"*

Most students, both the ones with low marks and the ones with high marks, felt that they needed more time to practise citation and referencing and generally more guidance with this requirement which they found particularly difficult. It was difficult not only because students' English was too poor to understand (and use) other people's ideas, but also because

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the ways of citing were unfamiliar to many of them. Students confessed that they did not really understand when, where and how to cite an idea. Many of them stated that in order to improve their referencing, they needed opportunities and encouragement to “practise more”, to “get more examples from teachers”, to “step by step study the rules how to do referencing or use the internet tools” and to “practise every now and then, so we don’t forget and make mistakes”, and, ideally, they should “practise all kinds of referencing exercises in class”. Students also called for more input and support from the teachers and the “helper” [ASA]. Teachers should “give clear explanation about what students should do”, or “teachers should teach us more details about how to write and check our ideas or essays and give us feedback”. Students should also be given “more sources of useful academic journals and articles”. They also expected that teachers could supervise more closely the work they did. The detailed discussions during the focus group interviews revealed that international students wanted to rely more on their teachers.

## *Students’ passiveness and poor time management*

There was evidence of passiveness among students, especially the weaker ones in the course. Although most of the students complained that referencing was too hard for them, and that they needed more assistance, only about 30 per cent to 50 per cent of the students turned up in each workshop provided by the ASA and only 32 students (28%) made appointments with the ASA for extra help. In fact, 11 students who sought ASA’s assistance were quite good students, with final marks of more than 70 per cent — indeed, six of them were among the best students, gaining an “A” grade at the end of the course. Some of the best students in the course were those who came to see the ASA every week.

Conversely, some weaker students tried to “escape” from seeing the ASA. When they were identified as “at risk” students, they were asked by their teachers to see the ASA for further help. They often said “yes” to the teachers, some even made appointments with the ASA, but then they did not turn up. There were several cases where the ASA made an appointment with these students, or contacted them when they did not turn up to reschedule the meeting time, but they often found different excuses and could not fix a time for an alternative meeting. These students were often the ones who did not come to class regularly and had low motivation in class activities. They did not often attend academic skills workshops. Some of them even confessed that they were lazy, that they did not do enough work and so could not fulfil all the course requirements. Some others explained that they failed because the requirements of the course were too high compared with their “levels”, and that their English was too poor to cope with

academic writing. Thus they tended to find ways to “escape” from learning.

Twenty-seven per cent of the students also suggested that their time-management skills were poor. They often focused on their assignments close to the due date and ran out of time before they could complete all of them<sup>1</sup>. The FOM assignments were usually considered to be the most difficult ones and so were often left until students had finished all other assignments, which was problematic because all assignments were due at about the same time.

## *“I don’t think referencing is that important!”*

By the end of the course, most students understood that citing other people’s ideas in their own writing was a good way to support their own arguments. Nonetheless, some students still held the opinion that referencing was not that important. Some were questioning why referencing was considered important in the FOM subject whereas in other subjects, such as Statistics, Microeconomics or Accounting, the teachers did not place such

**Most students understood that citing other people’s ideas in their own writing was a good way to support their own arguments.**

an emphasis on referencing. Students felt they did not need to worry about citing or paraphrasing in those subjects. This led to one student declaring that “it [referencing] should be omitted from the course!” Another student, although accepting that referencing was important, also stated that “we don’t have to make it

[referencing] too serious!” These students’ comments seem to support Park’s (2003) argument that students from non-English speaking backgrounds often perceive that plagiarism is not a serious issue. A few students said that they included the practice of citing and referencing in their assignments only because that was a requirement and there were marks to be gained for it, not because they really understood the reasons for it and certainly not because they believed it was the right thing to do. Furthermore, some students who used incorrect referencing conventions, and who consequently did not receive any marks for referencing, complained that they should have been given marks for encouragement because at least they had attempted to reference. All of this points to the fact that these students had not understood the importance of referencing in academic writing in the West. They still regarded referencing (and, by extension, the issue of plagiarism) as not a particularly serious requirement which they could (and did) overlook.

<sup>1</sup> Students normally enrol in four subjects in a trimester at La Trobe Melbourne.

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## Discussion

There is quite clear evidence in this study which supports the claim of Liu (2005), Phan Le Ha (2006), Briggs (2003), Leask (2006), Carroll (2002), and Tran Thi Tuyet (2012) that there is a need for providing clear guidance and ongoing support for international students in learning new academic norms in a different culture. Indeed, the clear guidance and explicit requirements provided in this study did assist students to improve their writing. Most students, at the end of the course, had realised that referencing supported and enhanced their own writing and arguments. However, not all students developed a firm understanding of what plagiarism is and how to avoid it. In fact, most students did not seem to be concerned about the charge of plagiarism, but they often had language difficulties and struggled over the question of how to incorporate other people's ideas in their own writing in an acceptable way. In terms of complying with the referencing requirements, the students' understanding and attitude indicated that the biggest barriers for this cohort of international students to master the referencing skills and to avoid the charge of plagiarism were deficiencies in their English language skills and poor academic skills. Poor English language skills interfered badly with students' writing and prevented them from making full use of the assistance provided in the course. Students' limitations in the English language made it difficult for them to understand:

- what the task required;
- which key words they should use to search the "right" articles;
- the content of academic journal articles, which are not as simple as newspaper articles;
- which ideas should be quoted;
- how to put these ideas in their own writing; and
- whether to quote or paraphrase.

Some students were even struggling with things such as which name was the author's surname, and how to find "technical" information (i.e. the name of the journal, volume number, and page numbers) to place in the references list.

The findings of this study, therefore, suggest that language barriers and new study requirements are major challenges for international students and that these together with ineffective study skills are factors associated with plagiarism. There seems to be a need for ongoing support for students to understand, practise and master referencing, which is an essential part of academic writing in Western higher education institutions. Clarifying the definition of plagiarism (Carroll, 2002), making the referencing requirements in assessment tasks explicit (Errey, 1994; Phan Le Ha, 2006), and providing more

structured activities involving referencing (Volet, 2003) are only some of the steps that need to be taken to tackle the issue of plagiarism among international students. These practices may be sufficient to draw students' awareness to the plagiarism issue, but are not sufficient to enable them to manage the academic integrity issue. Students need ongoing practice and support: to enhance their reading comprehension (especially in regard to finding relevant information); to improve their writing skills so that they can incorporate information and ideas from other authors into their own writing in an acceptable way; and, finally, to understand and follow the conventions of citation and referencing.

Apart from the language barrier, there seemed to be a gap between students' perceptions of plagiarism and referencing and teachers' expectations of students on this issue. Marshall and Garry's (2005) claim that students often regard the issue of plagiarism and referencing as less serious than the university does has certainly been borne out by this study.

Teachers' attitude towards the issue of plagiarism also adds to this confusion. Some teachers appeared to be more serious about the issue than others. Moreover, there does not seem

## Plagiarism among international students is indeed the outcome of complex personal and situational factors

to be agreement on what is considered general knowledge and what knowledge students need to cite. Thus, in some subjects and with some teachers, students can copy some ideas from lecture handouts or from text books without being charged as plagiarists. But, in other subjects, such as Law or FOM in this study, they cannot do so. This finding seems to be consistent with the claim that there is considerable diversity among academics across different disciplines about what constitutes plagiarism and the boundary between plagiarism and acceptable paraphrasing (East, 2010; Zimitat, 2012). This may create the misunderstanding among international students, especially when many of them hold the perception that copying ideas from teachers or textbooks is acceptable (Biggs & Watkins, 2001; Chan, 2001). The inconsistency in attitudes and teaching in the new environment not only creates confusion among international students, but also allows them to stay within their familiar and comfortable learning style and keep using deeply ingrained practices, such as copying from teachers or textbooks without any acknowledgement.

It seems to be necessary to point out that among 72 students returning the questionnaire, 11 students had just arrived at the beginning of the trimester, 45 students had been in Australia for less than a year, and only 10 students had been in Australia for more than three years. All international students

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who sought assistance from the ASA had been in Australia for less than a year. Therefore, the majority of students in this study had to undergo a double transition: from school to university and from one culture to another culture. A transition from school to university is not easy (Haggis & Pouget, 2002; Sutherland, 2003). The second transition, from one culture to another, seems to be even more challenging, at least for the cohort of students in this study. They have to change their learning habits, they have to change the language used in their study, and they have to learn new norms, new processes, and values attached to the new culture where they have come to pursue their tertiary study. This transition often takes time and is often preceded by a drop in performance (Van Geert, 1994). Although this three-month course was designed to enhance students' writing skills and referencing skills, it was not enough to create a complete change in the students' understanding of the norms in the new learning environment, especially the issue of plagiarism. There is a need for ongoing awareness, practice and support to assist these students in going through the cultural transition smoothly.

The support and guidance of the teachers and the ASA would not work without the effort of each individual student. Evidence from this study clearly indicates that if students are motivated, if they really want to learn, the transition will be shortened. The top five students in this course are not native speakers of English — they are from Vietnam, Sri Lanka and China and their time in Australia was all less than a year. These students had quite good English skills, they also put in much effort in their study and tried to seek assistance from both the teachers and the ASA when they experienced problems. Thus, with clear guidance and adequate support, the highly motivated students can adapt to the learning culture in the West quite quickly.

However, not all international students are highly motivated, especially the ones with poor language skills. Studying independently in a different culture in a language that they are not good at was a real challenge for many students. The group discussion revealed that some students in this course did not want to pursue their study in Australia, or they did not want to study the course they were enrolled in, but were "pushed" to come to Australia to learn in this discipline by their parents. Unsurprisingly, the motivation of these students was originally low. The low motivation, together with the difficulties in language and learning style, had led to laziness on the part of these students. They skipped classes, they did the assignments at the last minute, and they did not care much about the instruction of the teachers and about their results. Some of them even declined the assistance from both the teachers and the ASA. Obviously, students' intrinsic motivation did affect their perception of any learning requirements (Lightbown, Spada, Ranta, & Rand, 2006).

## Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that although culture is a factor affecting international students in the transition to a new learning environment, it is not decisive in shaping their understanding of and attitude towards referencing and plagiarism. English proficiency, the inherent writing style in the home country, students' motivation and their active or passive learning styles, together with the inconsistency in approaching the referencing issue among different teachers, appeared to be the key factors significantly affecting the students' ways of managing the citing and referencing issue. Plagiarism among international students is indeed the outcome of complex personal and situational factors. These factors need to be taken into consideration in the design of activities to adequately support international students. Making task requirements explicit and clear guidance on why and how to avoid plagiarism are essential. However, to achieve the desired outcome, additional ongoing support services, such as developing English proficiency and enhancing academic writing skills, need to be provided. Furthermore, there is a need for consistency in the implementation of the plagiarism policy and in the approach taken to the referencing issue across the university and among different teachers. Students also need to take responsibility for their own learning. They should know that success comes only to those who are able to be in charge of their own learning and who make enough effort to fulfil the requirements of their course, regardless of their cultural background.

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# The Student Experience in Private Higher Education in Australia



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## Abstract

Private higher education has been evolving in Australia during the past decade, with record numbers of students enrolling. This expansion in private higher education is attributed to many factors. These include changes to government policy related to higher education, unmet student demand in universities, and migration policies that were linked to skills shortages. Despite the growth in private higher education, the academic literature shows that there has been little substantial research into the student experience in that sector.

This paper is based on the analysis of focus group interviews conducted in five different private higher education providers with the aim of evaluating the student experience in the areas of teaching, course outcomes, and the range of support services and learning infrastructure provided to students. The paper argues for the need to genuinely listen to the student voice and take timely action to enhance students' experience in a highly competitive environment.

## Keywords

private higher education, student experience

## Introduction

The student experience is now considered fundamental to the quality agenda within any higher education setting. This focus has been further strengthened in many developed countries where governments use student experience measures to assess teaching quality and to link the outcomes to performance-based funding to reward or, in some cases, to penalise institutions (Bennett & Nair, 2010; Department of Business Innovation Skills, 2009; Commonwealth of Australia, 2009).

Although the student experience in universities has been debated in the academic literature for 50 years, only limited attempts have been made to gain insights into the experience of students in a private higher education setting, even with the unprecedented growth in this sector (AUQA, 2010; Shah & Nair, 2012). The research that has been undertaken in many parts of the world on the student experience is based primarily on students' university experience. Studies on the student experience and comparative analyses are becoming

increasingly important as governments in many countries rely on quantitative measures to assess quality assurance and ensure comparable outcomes. Another key reason for the need to improve insight into the student experience in private higher education is the prominence of the student voice in higher education, which includes different cohorts of students such as domestic, international onshore and offshore, various equity groups, and various modes of delivery.

In the Australian context, the government plans to make student satisfaction and other performance data of higher education institutions publicly available on the new MyUniversity website. Such information may influence the choice of prospective students when selecting higher education institutions. A recent US study of students in colleges offering higher education courses showed 90 per cent satisfaction with college education. The study suggests that colleges have played a key role in preparing students to be productive members of the workforce (38%), preparing young people to be responsible citizens (27%), and ensuring that all

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qualified students have equal access to a college education (21%) (Pew Research Center, 2011).

Understanding students' expectations and capturing data on the student experience are fundamental to the effective management of higher education. According to Ramsden (2009), by fostering and promoting engaged partnerships with students, institutions can improve teaching, course design, assessments, and quality processes to produce the best outcomes for students. Ramsden further argues that prospective students need better information about what they can expect from higher education in terms of independence in learning, contact with tutors, and other forms of support.

## Literature Review of the Student Experience

During the past four decades, research has consistently confirmed that students' perceptions are important parameters of the social and psychological aspects of the learning environment (Ramsden, 2005). This research also confirms a strong correlation between learning and teaching environments and levels of satisfaction (Nair & Fisher, 2001). The academic literature has consistently demonstrated that students are able to assess quality of courses and teaching, quality of support services, and the quality of resources and infrastructure based on their learning experiences (Shah & Nair, 2011). The endeavour to enhance the experience of all cohorts of students can be achieved only if institutions of higher education are genuinely engaged in listening to the student voice and acting on the results in a timely manner. In other words, the student experience is shaped by students' judgements rather than being defined by higher education providers (Shah & Nair, 2010).

Influenced by research findings and the external pressures to maintain quality, many institutions have realised the need to re-evaluate their approaches to meeting the expectations and needs of students (Bennett & Nair, 2010; Cheng & Tam, 1997; Griffin, Coates, McInnis, & James, 2003; Harvey, 2003). Harvey (2003) clearly articulates this by arguing that student feedback has gradually become an integral part of the continuous quality enhancement and assurance mechanisms in higher education. Systematic student evaluations have become embedded in the processes of higher education institutions as institutions realise that feedback from students and the overall student experience play a major part in influencing decisions to enter, persist with, or leave higher education (Mavondo, Zaman, & Abubaker, 2000; Nair & Pawley, 2006).

The student experience is a complex phenomenon with multiple dimensions. Several Australian studies (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005; Scott, 2006; Shah & Nair,

2010) suggest that students place significant emphasis on the quality not only of learning and teaching at an institution, but also on administrative factors.

High student satisfaction is influenced by factors such as course design, quality of teaching staff, the management of student assessment, the quality of the infrastructure, library and IT services, and the range of available support services. This viewpoint from a number of studies of UK universities suggests that course-related issues are more important to students than the social aspects of their learning experience (Shah & Nair, 2011). Recent studies by Kane, Williams, and Cappuccini-Ansfield (2008), indicate that students are in fact more concerned with course-related issues and that only a few aspects of the social side of their experience are regarded as very important.

Student dissatisfaction could have ominous consequences for both the institution and the students, including students withdrawing (Walther, 2000; Wiese, 1994), quitting or transferring (Astin, 2001; Chadwick & Ward, 1987; Dolinsky, 1994; Thomas, Adam, & Birchenough, 1996). Moreover, "negative word of mouth" can harm future applications (Ugolini, 1999). Furthermore, Alves and Raposo (2007) suggest that higher education institutions greatly benefit from being able to establish lasting relationships with their graduates if those graduates express high levels of satisfaction with their educational experience.

The importance of high student satisfaction is highlighted in the work of Shah and Nair (2010), Kane and colleagues (2008), and Scott (2006). Their studies suggest that the factors which influence student engagement and retention are predictors of high student satisfaction. The work of Kane et al. (2008) and Shah and Nair (2010) suggests that learning infrastructure and the quality of teachers, course design, student assessments and administrative support are all predictors of high student satisfaction. Scott (2006) suggests a number of additional factors contributing to student engagement and retention in higher education. These include sound, responsive, flexible, relevant, clear and mutually reinforcing course design that uses an appropriate variety of interactive, practice-oriented and problem-based learning methods, as well as capable, committed, accessible and responsive staff. Scott (2006) goes on to suggest that efficient and responsive administrative, IT, library, and student support systems are also factors contributing to student engagement, retention and satisfaction.

While the literature outlining the importance of, and factors relating to, the student experience in universities is abundant, very little work has been reported on this from the perspective of students in the private higher education sector. Studies by Shah and Nair (2011) and Shah and Brown (2009) report some of the distinctive features that make private higher education

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attractive to a growing cohort of students. They include the following: vocationally orientated learning with opportunity for students to undertake work experience while studying; opportunities for students to network with prospective employers while studying; quality of teachers; small class sizes with an average of 20 students; employment of leading industry practitioners as teachers; personalised academic support services; and use of technology in learning, with significant student support for online learning. Shah and Brown (2009) further suggest that a high student satisfaction score on the national Course Experience Questionnaire, compared with that of public universities, and a high graduate employment rate (approximately eight per cent to 10 per cent higher than that for university graduates) are other distinguishing factors of private higher education.

This paper outlines the findings of the student experience in five private higher education institutions in Australia. It provides an insight into the positive and negative aspects of the experience and adds to the literature on student experience in general. The study is timely for two key reasons: first, the current lack of research on the student experience in private higher education providers; and second, the private sector is experiencing growth which presents significant challenges related to quality assurance (Al-Atiqi & Alharbi, 2009; Gupta, 2008; Xiaoying & Abbott, 2008).

## Method

This study draws on data from five different private higher education institutions in Australia. It involves qualitative feedback from 120 students. The institutions range in size from 300 students to 5,000 students. The student profile at these institutions includes domestic and international students, full-time and part-time students, male and female students, recent school leavers and mature age students, students who are first in the immediate family to undertake higher education, non-English speaking background students, and students engaged in face-to-face and online learning.

The five institutions offer courses in diverse areas including business management, accounting and financial management, human resources, journalism, advertising and marketing, public relations, hospitality management, counselling and psychotherapy, naturopathy, Chinese medicine, graphic design, and interior design. Two private higher education institutions offer diploma and advanced diploma courses with pathways into four universities, and the other three institutions offer their own undergraduate and postgraduate degrees.

Student feedback was acquired through focus group meetings. Focus groups were used as they offer a means of listening

to the perspectives of different students in a group situation about their learning experience. The underpinning assumption of this method is that individuals are valuable sources of information and are capable of expressing their own feelings and behaviours (Clarke, 1999).

In this study, each focus group was made up of seven to eight students. Structured questions were designed, and all participants were encouraged to provide verbal feedback.

Students were informed that their feedback would be de-identified before it was reported and used to recommend improvements in the institutions. In several cases, students indicated that they were expressing not only their views but also the views of other students in their class who had asked them to pass on information.

## Findings

This study enabled the authors to identify the characteristics of the student experience that could be seen as predictors of high student satisfaction as well as identify areas where

### The student experience is a complex phenomenon with multiple dimensions.

further changes are needed in order to improve the student experience. The recurring themes that emerged from the focus group discussions on student experience characteristics are grouped into six key domains. They include: quality of teachers, course design, learning environment and support, quality of administrative support, student assessments, and general student facilities. Table 1 outlines the six domains and the key characteristics of the student experience in private higher education.

In the Quality of Teachers domain, students spoke positively about teachers' knowledge of the subject matter and their up-to-date knowledge based on industry trends and changes; about teachers' availability for consultation in and after the class and ongoing communication; and about teachers' accessibility at the institutions. Students also spoke positively about the support provided by teachers to link students with employers for work placement or experience based on the teachers' own networks with industry and employers.

In the Course Design domain, the recurring themes included vocational or practice-based learning embedded into the curriculum which enabled students to undertake work placements or work experience while studying, the short duration of courses (e.g. one-year diploma), course relevance

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**Table 1:**

*Domains of the student experience in private higher education.*

Key Domains	Characteristics of the student experience
Quality of teachers	Teachers' knowledge Teachers' availability for consultation Teachers' accessibility
Course design	Practice-based learning Short duration Relevance to career goals Pathway to university for further study Flexibility (face-to-face and online learning)
Learning environment and support	Small classes Interaction with peers and the teacher Friendly learning environment Learning culture Pastoral care for students Working one-on-one with students Parents' expectations of education
Quality of administrative support	Flexible timetable Helpful staff Service-oriented culture ICT and use of technology
Student assessments	Relevance of the assessment Clarity and consistent use of the criteria for marking Using different assessment methods Assessment workload Timely feedback to students Constructive feedback that helps in further learning
General student facilities	Adequacy of facilities and infrastructure The growth of student numbers and alignment with facilities Library adequacy and access to electronic materials General student facilities

to students' career goals, courses that provide pathways into further education, and the flexibility of courses, including the option to study face-to-face or online with a wide range of elective subjects.

The Learning Environment and Support domain included the student experience as it related to the following: small class size with an average of 16 to 23 students, thus encouraging interaction with the teachers and peers; a friendly learning environment in small classes where students know each other; the learning culture within the institutions which gave opportunity to students to challenge learning and attain key generic skills such as critical thinking and problem solving; the pastoral care given to students by academic and administrative staff; and the provision of various

forms of academic support, including working one-on-one with students identified as being "at risk".

Interviews with students also suggested areas where their experience had not met their expectations. Students emphasised that the quality of administrative support is critical in productive learning. While students were very positive about their experience in terms of what happens in a traditional classroom, their experience of administrative support was less favourable and quite mixed. The key issues raised in this domain included the need for flexibility in timetabling, with the opportunity for students to adjust their study schedule to incorporate full-time or part-time work or family commitments, and the development of a service-

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oriented culture focused on customers and solutions. Students spoke about the need for institutions to recognise high tuition fees and the expectation of value for money with respect to administrative support.

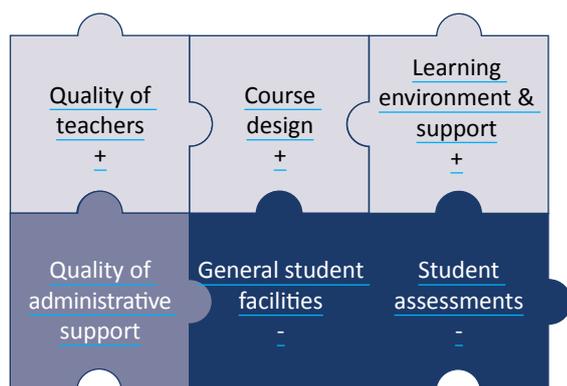
Two areas where students raised concerns in all five private institutions in this study were student assessment and general student facilities. In the Student Assessment domain, the recurring themes requiring improvement included the following: alignment of the assessment with the course content and learning outcomes; clarity and consistent use of the marking criteria; the use of a variety of assessment methods rather than a heavy reliance on examinations and essays; assessment workload with the view to assessing less and assessing better; timely feedback to students on assessments; and the provision of constructive feedback that assists subsequent learning.

In the General Student Facilities domain, the recurring issues identified included inadequacy of facilities and infrastructure; the need for alignment of teaching facilities and infrastructure with the growth of the student population; the provision of adequate library space and resources, in particular access to electronic materials; and up-to-date student facilities and amenities.

Figure 1 outlines the recurring themes based on the feedback provided by students. The key characteristics of the student experience provide the connection between each of the six domains. The areas shaded in light grey represent the areas of positive experience, the area shaded in dark grey represents the area needing moderate improvement and ongoing monitoring, and the black-shaded areas represent low-performing areas needing urgent attention.

Figure 1:

*Features of the student experience in private higher education.*



## Discussion and Conclusion

This paper provides interesting insights into the student experience in private higher education. The students' feedback revealed a number of factors impacting on the quality of their experience. The potential for greater engagement with peers and the teaching staff, the currency and industry-specific knowledge of the teaching staff, the opportunity to undertake practical industry-based work experience and to build relationships with industry, and the small class sizes and potential for dialogue within the classroom were cited as key factors in providing a positive learning environment. Students also stated that these reasons were influential in their choice to study at a private higher education institution. A further factor was that students who had prior university experience felt that, compared with universities, private higher education institutions offered a more personalised educational approach.

Many of the characteristics of a high-quality student experience reported in studies carried out in universities (Kane et al., 2008; Krause et al., 2005; Scott, 2006; Shah & Nair, 2010) were confirmed in this study. However, there were a number of distinguishing characteristics specific to private higher education. Students in private higher education institutions indicated that the greater opportunity to engage with staff and their colleagues was the main reason they chose to study there rather than at a larger university. The students in this study reported that the small size of the classes enabled them to have a dialogue with their classmates and also facilitated greater engagement in the learning process. Some students indicated that they had previously attended major universities and left because they found lectures overwhelmingly large, impersonal and isolating.

Another difference that emerged when making a comparison with university education was the students' positive perception of the curriculum and its design. Students consistently reported that courses were designed to offer "hands-on application" of the skills needed for their required discipline. The opportunity to have practical industry-based work experience built into the curriculum at private institutions, which is not as prevalent in university studies, was of significant importance to students.

In order to increase the overall student satisfaction, computer and IT facilities and the general student amenities need to be improved in both universities and private higher education. The contemporary learner, whether studying at a public university or with a private provider, expects to study in a pleasant environment and have access to modern IT systems, facilities and services.

Feedback gathered in this study suggests that private institutions are a viable, exciting, and popular option within the

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higher education sector. This market is clearly growing, with institutions focusing particularly on specialised areas, allowing them to respond quickly to market trends and changing policies. The fact that many staff are practising professionals is very appealing to students as they engage in authentic contemporary topics and issues, drawing upon current resources and information.

The Australian government has set some very ambitious targets for higher education in the future. These include having 20 per cent of student enrolments from low socio-economic groups and 40 per cent of students between the ages of 25 and 35 with an undergraduate degree by 2020. These targets will provide some exciting opportunities for private higher education providers to grow even further. The sector has many fine attributes that it has nurtured and developed over the years. It will be important for the leaders of private higher education institutions to constantly review why students choose to study with them and to build positive and supportive networks across the sector.

This study confirms that the student experience is not based solely on what occurs in the classroom, but rather that it is the total student experience that determines students' judgement of quality. This total student experience is influenced by teaching, course outcomes, adequacy of resources and support systems, how assessment is managed, the level of academic support for students, the use of ICT in learning and teaching, and the general quality of student facilities.

Across Australia the number of students accessing private higher education is increasing rapidly (including online learning), and this study provides insights about why students choose to study at private institutions. Several key messages for them emerge from this study. First and foremost, students' perception of their experience of private higher education in Australia is a positive one, however more work is required to genuinely listen to students and implement timely improvement in a systematic manner. Second, in a demand driven higher education market, student choice is based on the reputation of the institution in providing a quality student experience. Finally, in a highly regulated higher education environment, the use of student experience data is important, along with other measures of academic outcomes in tracking and improving the quality of learning and teaching and other support.

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# From Pathway to Destination: A Preliminary Investigation into the Transition of Pathway Students to Undergraduate Study



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## Abstract

This article describes the results of a study conducted into the transition of students from a diploma course into mainstream university undergraduate programs. The main aim of the study was to explore the issues that relate to successful transition from the perspective of the students themselves. To that end, data were collected from 78 respondents to an online survey of students enrolled in mainstream study in a public university, who had previously undertaken a diploma with the private pathway provider. Follow-up in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 students.

Issues that were considered included English language development, academic adjustment and social adjustment. Participants were also invited to comment on their experience of the pathway provider in terms of how well it prepared them for mainstream study. The findings indicated that there are many factors which can facilitate successful transition, and that in general the pathway was valued for its capacity to ease students into becoming familiar with the university environment and coping with the demands of mainstream study.

## Keywords

transition to higher education, academic adjustment

## Introduction

The number of students articulating from non-school-based, post-compulsory education courses into universities in Australia has risen markedly in the past two decades, both in absolute terms and as a percentage of the overall student population. This has no doubt been assisted by the creation of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) in 1995, which was intended to support movement between educational sectors and enhance comparability of qualifications. Such pathway programs are an embedded feature of the Australian higher education sector, with a diversity of programs delivered through both public and private institutions. Their significance for the recruitment of international students is highlighted by a benchmark study of universities' recruitment via pathway programs carried out by the Australian Universities International Directors Forum in 2006 (reported in Adams, Burgess, & Phillips, 2009), which found that "12.4 per cent of commencements [for 23 of the 26 universities providing data]

were recruited from the university's own pathways, on or offshore" (p. 181).

As the range and diversity of student recruitment pathways increase, it is important that both pathway providers and their partner universities pay attention to the factors that might impact on that specific cohort's educational experience. Issues such as students' adjustment, academic progress and overall wellbeing need to be clearly understood, to allow the development of approaches and activities which facilitate successful transition. Moreover, this is something that was encouraged in the 2009 AQF National Policy and Guidelines on Credit Arrangements, which stated that "clear and transparent quality assurance mechanisms are essential for ensuring confidence in the credit decisions made by different education and training providers and sectors" (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2009, p. 17). While there is a strong emphasis on the efficacy of pathway courses within

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the AQF, little work has been done to explore the actual lived experience of pathway students as they transition to the higher education setting. The study described in this article sought to address this gap. It was undertaken by one private pathway provider, in collaboration with its public university partner, to examine former pathway students' transition experience and to obtain their retrospective views about how well they believed their college experience had prepared them for undergraduate studies.

The pathway provider, described hereafter as "the College", is located on the main campus of its primary destination university (subsequently referred to as "the University"), and enrolls up to 1500 fee-paying students at any one time. When the research was conducted, 85 per cent of enrolled students were international, and 15 per cent were domestic. The College offers a Certificate IV in Tertiary Preparation; a non-award tertiary access course; and a range of higher education diplomas which, in accordance with AQF policy and guidelines, provide credit for one third of a three-year degree (or one-quarter of a four-year degree) and therefore articulate into the second year of undergraduate study at the University.

The College is branded with the University's name and is recognised as its significant pathway provider. It is part of an educational organisation founded in Australia which owns 19 colleges in eight different countries, and has replicated the model in Australia and overseas. The similarity of this structure across colleges and their associated universities means that the findings from the study reported in this article are likely to have a high level of transferability to all private and public pathway course providers and the universities into which their students articulate.

The University has more than 46,000 students in total, enrolled across several campuses in Australia, Singapore and Malaysia, as well as numerous transnational partnerships with other education providers. International students form approximately 35 per cent of its overall student population, and come from more than 100 different countries. More than 300 students enter the University after completing a course at the College each year, and are distributed across a range of discipline areas, including engineering and science, business, health sciences and humanities.

## The Study

The primary aim of the study was to gain a greater level of understanding of issues that relate to successful transition between pathway and mainstream study, so it was essential to investigate the experience of the students themselves. To that end, the main research questions were:

- What is the profile of a successful transfer student in mainstream undergraduate study?
- What factors contribute to successful transition?
- How can the College foster the development of factors that facilitate success?

The study was intended to encompass all aspects of the students' experience at the College: teaching practices, study skills support, and pastoral care. The literature on previous studies of international students indicates that there are numerous factors that can impact on success in higher education, including English language, academic and social adjustment, and access to support networks and services. Some aspects of these factors are outlined below.

There is a plethora of scholarly output on the use of English at a tertiary level by international students and students who have English as an additional language (EAL). It has been found that students may have difficulties with reading comprehension and reading strategies, and that students may engage in time-consuming activities such as re-reading, checking for clarification and frequently looking up unknown words (Fotovatian & Shokrpour, 2007; Skyrme, 2005). They may also experience significant difficulties in coping with university reading requirements, particularly in relation to technical and discipline-specific vocabulary (Laufer, 1992; Reid, Kirkpatrick, & Mulligan, 1998), dense writing styles and complex sentence structures (Chu, Swaffar, & Charney, 2002; Reid, et al., 1998; Tang, 1992), and "interpretative gaps in the knowledge, experiences and assumptions they are able to apply to their reading" (Reid et al., 1998, p. 71).

International students may come from countries which have markedly different writing conventions from those that apply in Australian universities, and so they may also experience writing difficulties such as recognising different registers or identifying the text organisation associated with different genres (Rochecouste, Oliver, Mulligan, & Davies, 2010; Zhu, 2004). Cultural differences might also be a factor in cases of plagiarism by EAL students (Bretag, 2007; Holmes, 2004).

Listening and speaking can also present problems for EAL students. There may be issues with listening because of, for example, the speed of spoken language, the use of idioms and slang, and the variety of accents with which English is spoken (Hutcheson & Tse, 2004; Vandergrift, 2006). Considering the centrality of the lecture/tutorial to the university learning environment, developing competent listening skills — which includes, for students, a capacity to synthesise and process what is heard for the purpose of taking notes (Flowerdew & Miller, 1992) — is critical for academic success. Spoken English can be particularly problematic for EAL speakers, not only

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because they lack high level linguistic competence but also because of low confidence levels and fear of making mistakes (Lee, 2007; Paulhus, Duncan, & Yik, 2002). Many students come from educational backgrounds where verbal expression is limited (particularly when English is an additional language) and the form of debate in tutorials in Western universities is unknown (Fegan, 2008; Tan & Goh, 2006). Many international EAL students fail to develop their speaking skills to any considerable degree during their studies in Australia, not only because of their reticence in class but also because they are unable to develop social contacts with English-speaking Australian students (Fegan, 2008; Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2007).

Language may also be a factor in other issues that have been identified as impacting on the quality of international students' educational experience, since lack of proficiency in the language may affect a student's capacity to build social networks and obtain employment (Roberts, 2012). Other issues that affect the extent to which they are able to adjust successfully to their new environment include culture shock (Chapdelaine & Alextich, 2004; Fallon, 2010), loneliness (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008) and the stress students experience when losing their home support systems (Lee, Koeske, & Sales, 2004). Studies have also identified perceptions of racial discrimination and concerns about personal security as issues for international students (Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2008). It follows that the provision of appropriate support services (linguistic, academic and pastoral) is likely to be an important contributor to international students' successful adjustment to tertiary study (Hellsten & Prescott, 2007; Rochecouste et al., 2010). As a recent study comprehensively illustrates, it is also essential that support services provided are well targeted and student-centred (Roberts, 2012).

There is, therefore, already an extensive body of research that has identified the kinds of issues that may contribute to an international student's ability to succeed in tertiary education in Australia. What has not yet been well documented, however, is the extent to which pathway programs — which tend by their very nature to be rich in opportunities for language development and social, education and cultural adjustment — have been able to facilitate and promote a successful transition to tertiary study for their students. It is this that the study described in this article sought to investigate.

## Method

A mixed methods approach was selected as the overarching methodology for this study, in order to support the examination of the issue from multiple perspectives and thus provide a more

complete picture (Feilzer, 2010) as well as a greater level of robustness of the findings (Punch, 2005). Data collection took the form of a widely distributed online survey, which contained both closed-ended and open-ended questions, followed by in-depth semi-structured interviews with a smaller group of participants. Data collected comprised solely material obtained from the students themselves. While this was a deliberate strategy, since it was the student voice that was the intended aim of the study, it is acknowledged that such an approach would present only part of the overall picture.

The participants for the survey were selected according to two criteria. First, they had to be enrolled at the time (2011) in any undergraduate course, either full-time or part-time, at the main campus of the University. Second, they had to have completed at least one semester of university study, so that they would be more likely to provide informed feedback about their time at the University. Through this selection process, a total population of 418 was identified from the University's student database. As the University routinely limits the number of students that may be contacted for research purposes, a random sample of 340 students, or just over 80 per cent of the total population, was generated by the University's planning office. The sample selected was therefore likely to be highly representative of the overall population.

A final question in the online survey invited students to participate in a follow-up interview. In total, 10 students agreed to participate in either a focus group or individual interview.

## Results

The results from the survey and interviews are presented below in terms of respondents' demographic data, their perceptions of their English language capabilities, their academic and social adjustment, and their views of how well the College had prepared them for study.

### *Demographic data*

A total of 78 students (23%) responded to the survey. Such a response rate is not atypical for survey research, and was considered sufficiently high to provide useful results, although they should be treated with caution. Of the 78 respondents to the survey, 33 were female and 45 male, the median age being 22 years old. All respondents except one were born overseas, and seven were citizens or permanent residents of Australia. Thirteen were from Hong Kong or Macau; 11 from Indonesia; 11 from Malaysia or Singapore; 10 from India, Pakistan or Sri Lanka; and the remainder came from a wide range of other countries. The majority of respondents (68) spoke a language other than English (LOTE) as their first language (referred to in

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this paper as EAL students), while the remaining 10 students were of English-speaking background, although four of these reported that they spoke a LOTE at home.

The demographic information indicated that the sample was not representative of the College's graduates since females, Chinese nationals and those studying business courses were under-represented, while males, Indian nationals and those studying Science and Engineering and Health Science courses were over-represented. Table 1 illustrates how the survey respondents were distributed by course compared with the distribution by intake to the University from the College (Semester 1, 2010 is used to illustrate the typical distribution, with percentages rounded to whole numbers).

**Table 1:**

*Respondents' discipline compared with overall intake from the College.*

Discipline area*	Respondents to survey		Semester 1, 2010 intake to the University	
	Total %	Total number	Total %	Total number
Built Environment	1	1	4	21
Commerce	10	8	61	276
Design	1	1	6	28
Engineering	50	39	12	53
Health Science	25	19	7	31
Humanities	3	2	3	12
Information Technology	1	1	3	13
Physical Science	9	7	4	19
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>453</b>

\* Based on diploma completed at the College.

Twenty-seven participants had been admitted to the College on the basis of their Year 11 or equivalent studies, 27 with Year 12 graduation or equivalent, and 24 on the basis of their university entrance qualifications, such as the Chinese university entrance exam, Gao Kao. The IELTS was by far the most common

means by which students had met the English language entry requirement to the College (36), followed by a range of other measures. All participants had completed a diploma at the College before articulating into the University, where the major single group of respondents was in its third year (45.5%), with the others in second year (39%) and fourth year (15.5%). It should be noted that students undertaking the diploma pathway do so because they have not met the University's academic or English language entry requirements, and the results of this study should be considered in that context.

## English language issues

Respondents were invited to rate the level of difficulty they experienced with each of the four macro English language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) at the point of starting their studies at the College, on entry to mainstream study at the University, and at the time of completing the survey. Ratings ranged from 1 to 5, where 1 represented "no difficulties at all" and 5 represented "major difficulties".

Table 2 illustrates the mean level of difficulty with English language skills reported by EAL students and those from an English speaking background (ESB). While the two groups cannot be directly compared, given the differences in the numbers in each group, it is interesting to note that the mean level of perceived difficulty of any language skill was not very high among any group of respondents at any time. This perhaps reflects the likelihood, indicated from demographic and other information, that many of the respondents were among the higher-performing of the College's graduates. Within the small group of ESB respondents, little perceived change had taken place over the duration of their studies. The EAL respondents reported progressively fewer difficulties in all English language skills from the time they commenced at the University until the time of taking the survey, which may seem unsurprising except that the evidence that students' language skills "automatically" improve as they move through their degree has not necessarily been found to be the case (Craven, 2012). A proactive approach on the part of pathway providers and universities is therefore essential, in order to equip students with the skills to engage in a process of continuous improvement during the course of their study. As one survey respondent noted: "[The College] really emphasized on [sic] honing English communication skills, from presentations to synthesizing [sic] to reports. This prepared most students as they continued on through the University".

Writing was the source of greatest difficulty for EAL students throughout their studies, from the time of starting at College (mean 2.37), on entry to University (2.21), and by the time of the survey (1.99). Indeed, at the time of transfer from the

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Table 2:

Mean level of difficulty experienced with English skills (n=78; ESB=10, EAL=68).

Time	English skills and first language							
	Speaking		Listening		Speaking		Listening	
	ESB	EAL	ESB	EAL	ESB	EAL	ESB	EAL
On starting college	1.0	2.19	1.10	1.88	1.20	2.37	1.00	1.79
On starting University	1.0	1.91	1.00	1.70	1.20	2.21	1.00	1.70
At time of survey	1.10	1.75	1.20	1.49	1.10	1.99	1.00	1.55

College into University, 40 per cent of EAL students rated their difficulties with writing at 3 or above, although by the time of the survey this was the case for just 24 per cent of EAL students. The importance of writing was emphasised by one interviewee: “... Second year now is all essay and report-writing. It’s not easy, the discussion part is hard, you have to show your ideas and referencing is important to avoid plagiarism. [The College] covered it — it’s quite handy” (Interviewee 3).

With regard to speaking, students commented on difficulties with giving presentations, contributing to class discussions, working with other students and mixing socially. As one Indonesian student commented: “It is especially hard when doing presentations in a group ... In front of the class I was really nervous because I knew my English was not good. Even before the presentation I kept trying to talk to Australians and you know you’ve got that negative feedback they look blank” (Interviewee 1). This particular student also had issues communicating with her peers once she transferred, which she put down to the low numbers of “Australian” students in the College: “When I was in [the] College, I hardly communicate [sic] with Australian students, and when I transferred to [the University], I was shocked and was unsure as how to communicate with the Australian students”. Indeed, a number of interviewees strongly supported the view that the simplest route to language development was to, as one person put it, “go out there and really talk to people” (Interviewee 2). Another offered similar advice: “Don’t always hang with students from your own country” (Interviewee 3).

## Students’ academic adjustment

Respondents were asked to rate the level of difficulty they experienced with a number of academic adjustment issues commonly reported by students when making the transition

to university study. The list of items was compiled by reference to the literature, and also following consultation with senior staff at the College who had extensive experience in working with students in a support capacity. Ratings on a scale of 1 to 5 were required (1=No difficulties at all; 5=Major difficulties). The results (Table 3) indicate that, overall, students found the major issues to be balancing time commitments (such as work, study, family), being able to contribute to class discussions and ask questions in classes (i.e. to “speak out”), keeping up with the amount of reading required, handling periods of stress, giving presentations, and understanding lecturers’ accents. Concerns appeared to be a mix of language or performance-related issues and more generic study issues.

EAL students were significantly more likely than students with English as a first language to report difficulties in asking questions in class and contributing to class discussions, using academic language in assignments and synthesising ideas from different sources when completing assignments. There were also differences across disciplines: students in Science and Engineering expressed significantly more difficulty than those in Health Sciences with understanding lecturers’ accents, finding appropriate materials, balancing time commitments, and finding appropriate support. However, in general, students reported fewer concerns about using appropriate organising structures in their writing and about avoiding plagiarism than might have been expected from the literature.

## Students’ social adjustment and access to support

Respondents to the survey were asked how well they adjusted to everyday social activities and relationships in their first semester of study at the University, and about their access to support networks. A list of some of the common difficulties that students experience in settling into their social

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**Table 3:**

*Difficulties experienced with academic issues (n=77).*

Difficulties experienced with academic issues	Overall mean	Standard deviation
Understanding lecture content	2.08	0.98
Understanding lecturers' accents	2.36	1.15
Keeping up with note-taking in lectures	2.04	1.01
Understanding discussions in tutorials/seminars	2.12	1.11
Asking questions/contributing to class discussions	2.51	1.29
Delivering presentations in class	2.39	1.21
Keeping up with amount of reading required	2.48	1.07
Understanding course texts and academic articles	2.01	0.93
Evaluating sources for relevance and reliability	2.14	0.98
Synthesising ideas from various sources when completing assignments	2.17	0.92
Using academic language in assignments	2.23	1.18
Using appropriate structure in assignments	1.91	1.09
Using appropriate referencing (avoiding plagiarism)	1.73	0.97
Finding appropriate materials for assignments in library and databases	1.97	1.03
Getting assignments in on time	1.62	0.83
Balancing time commitments (study, work, family etc.)	2.53	1.21
Working effectively with other students on group assignments	2.03	0.99
Handling periods of anxiety or stress	2.44	1.30
Finding appropriate learning support services	2.20	1.22
Confidently asking for help or advice	2.20	1.31

relationships and dealing with personal issues was provided to respondents, sourced not only from the research literature but also from staff at the College with experience in providing support. Respondents were asked to rate the level of difficulty they experienced at the University (1= No difficulties at all; 5= Major difficulties). The results (Table 4) showed that respondents had the greatest difficulties with participating in social or sporting activities, feeling valued as a member of a faculty or school, obtaining support when they felt stressed, and making friends with students from different language backgrounds. The results for this and the above section are broadly aligned with previous studies, such as that of Fiocco (2006), who found that key adjustment issues for students were organising their time, studying sufficiently, understanding what was expected, living away from home, understanding lecturers, submitting assignments on time, improving their English, and making new friends.

It is interesting and important to note that, in general, students perceived that they had more issues adjusting to their academic and social environments than they did with

language as defined by the four macro-skills. This may illustrate the distinction between questions that related to their daily experience and those that related to the more abstract concept of language as a set of generic skills.

Respondents were also asked about the extent to which they had made use of the support services offered by the College, which included English language skills, study skills, mathematics, and computing workshops or programs. Only a little under half (48%) of the students who completed this question had used one or more of the support programs offered by the College, and even the most popular programs (the English development and study skills programs) were used by less than one third of respondents. These results reflect an issue that has been widely identified in the literature, namely, that students do not participate to a great extent in available support programs (Kingston & Forland, 2008; Roberts, 2012).

Interviewees were generally positive about the academic workshops, with sessions on referencing and avoiding plagiarism being singled out as particularly helpful. Some

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**Table 4:**

*Social adjustment and access to support networks on transfer to University — Mean level of difficulty experienced (n=77).*

Issues related to social adjustment and access to support	Overall mean	Standard deviation
Participating in social or sporting activities	2.51	1.373
Feeling valued as a member of faculty/ school	2.34	1.188
Getting support when stressed	2.27	1.154
Making friends with students from different first language backgrounds	2.18	1.295
Making friends outside the College group	2.12	1.256
Staying motivated to continue studies	2.08	1.178
Overcoming homesickness or loneliness	2.05	1.327
Establishing good relationship with lecturers/tutors	2.03	1.112
Establishing good relationship with fellow students	1.94	1.151

interviewees indicated that the College should do more to encourage students to attend the workshops on offer and try to move the students towards a greater level of autonomy. One student’s comment was instructive: “Units for English development I have heard are useful but I did not attend. At that time I was quite confident about my English, but when I got into uni I realised my English wasn’t as good as I thought” (Interviewee 3).

## *The College experience*

The survey concluded by asking students to comment on a scale of 1 to 4 on how well the College had prepared them in six key areas: English language skills, study skills, understanding of course content, social skills, understanding of University culture and understanding of Australian culture. Table 5 presents the responses, which indicated that the majority of participants believed that the College had prepared them well, or very well, in all six of the areas identified, although a substantial number were less satisfied. An open-ended question in the survey, asking respondents what the College could do better, tended to elicit general comments such as “could help students to improve their English”, “developing

**Table 5:**

*Preparation for University study: Student ratings\* (n=77).*

Skills/knowledge developed	1	2	3	4	Overall mean
English language skills	5	21	33	16	2.80
Study skills	6	22	31	12	2.76
Understanding of course content	6	21	36	12	2.72
Social skills	9	23	23	12	2.53
University culture	6	23	30	16	2.75
Australian culture	7	26	25	17	2.69

\*1 = Not very well at all; 2 = Just OK; 3 = Well; 4 = Very well.

study skills”, and “encouraging socialization [sic]”, but there were also some interesting specific suggestions such as “conversational classes with Australians” and “engaging students in field work”.

## Discussion and conclusion

This study is unique in that it explored the views of a specific cohort of students from the private sector who were able to reflect retrospectively on their College experience from a highly informed position within the University for which their College studies had prepared them. To some extent the findings reinforce those from other studies on students in the university sector. They illustrate that EAL students experience some difficulty with adjusting to the language demands of university study, particularly in relation to academic writing and speaking in all contexts (see Fegan, 2008; Paulhus, Duncan & Yik, 2002; Rochecouste et al., 2010), and that students experience some issues with academic and social adjustment when they enter university (see Roberts, 2012).

However, the findings from this study differ from previous research findings in a number of ways, particularly in relation to the degree of difficulty that students reported in making the required language and academic adjustments to university study. The figures from the survey indicated that few issues rated more than halfway up the scale, and that the standard deviation was low. While making comparisons with other studies is problematic when the measurement tools are not

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commensurate, such issues as overcoming homesickness or loneliness appeared to be of less concern for these students than has been reported elsewhere in the literature (e.g. Fallon, 2010). Given the kinds of comments obtained from the open-ended questions in the survey and from the interview data, it appears likely that the experience of studying within the College environment was a valuable way of easing students into mainstream study. A number of students commented positively on this enabling function. One interviewee, for example, stated that “[the] College provides a smooth transition to uni — no need to jump, jump is hard” (Interviewee 3).

It was clear from the research that successful preparation for mainstream undergraduate study involves multiple factors, which taken holistically can be understood as a process of familiarisation with all facets of the university environment. According to one interviewee, “[the College] prepared me a sense [sic] of how university works and I am glad to have the experience before entering the University”. At a social level, too, this sense of familiarisation is important. As one interviewee commented: “...when you make new friends [in mainstream] and go out you can say ‘oh I know that place’, so we are not that new anymore”. As a consequence, one outcome of the research has been closer collaboration between the College and the University in preparing students for the culture of a particular faculty, each unique in its own way. Other similar projects are under way.

With respect to recommendations for further research, it would be useful to address the research questions raised in this study using alternative methodologies, and by using data obtained from sources external to students’ perceptions alone. Such studies could involve, for example, the direct measurement of students’ performance, or data collected from other stakeholders.

Finally, from the perspective of a private higher education provider, the commitment in terms of time and resources is worthy of note. Funded by the College, but undertaken by an independent consultant in collaboration with staff from both the College and the University, the project was complex, time-consuming and costly. It took more than a year from the time the proposal was submitted to the completion of the data analysis and final report. The resource commitment was considerable, with more than 300 hours invested by the project consultant alone. This has implications for the replication of such a study, which is desirable not only to evaluate improvements but also to establish a database of comparative information over time. Promoting ways in which such studies can be facilitated across both partner organisations will be the next challenge for the institutions concerned and worthy of consideration by any other pathway partners.

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# A Unique Approach to Work-integrated Learning: Meeting Industry, Student and Educator Needs Through Academic and Experiential Elements



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## Abstract

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is an increasingly important component of tertiary education courses. This paper presents an action-based research project describing a concurrent industry placement and formal education WIL model that integrates three components – experiential learning, academic learning and mentoring – to deliver graduate attributes identified in the graduate profile. Qualitative data was drawn from students’ reflective learning journals, students’ workplace assessment reports, employers’ industry placement evaluations, and interviews with Kenvale College staff who mentor students. This WIL model was found to be effective, as it enhanced students’ learning experience and facilitated the graduate employability skills through a formalised reflective practice. The reflective process provided students with learning goals, progressive reflection, assessment and evaluation.

## Keywords

work-integrated learning, industry placement, experiential learning, reflective learning journals

## Introduction

Increasingly both the vocational and higher education sectors are placing greater emphasis on work-based learning to integrate competencies and theory with practical work experience. It is in this context that work-based learning is seen to enhance the learning experience of students (Busby, Brunt, & Baber, 1997) and facilitate educators and trainers to keep abreast of industry trends and development (Zopiatis, 2007). This paper is an action research case study examining work-integrated learning (WIL) in a hospitality education context. The education provider, Kenvale College, offers a unique WIL setting of concurrent work and study throughout the duration of each course. This type of WIL is distinct from “block release” industry work, and provides both an academic and experiential component concurrently in each semester of study.

The academic literature provides many examples and research on work-integrated learning in the form of internships: short-term practical work (Aggett & Busby, 2011; Zopiatis, 2007); sandwich or block placements (Busby et al., 1997; Walmsley, Thomas, & Jameson, 2006) or work experience, practicum or cooperative education (Martin, Fleming, Ferkins, Wierma, & Coll, 2010; Waryszack, 1999), but the literature does not address the type of WIL apparent in the concurrent model that Kenvale College offers.

Problems associated with the implementation of WIL include: lack of clarity in expectations and goals from students, industry

and education providers (Mulcahy, 1999; Zopiatis, 2007); various levels of commitment, resources and perceptions from all three stakeholders involved (Patrick et al., 2008; Zopiatis, 2007); the possibility of non-meaningful work provided by industry (Chao, 2006; Lam & Chung, 2006; Walmsley et al., 2006); stress-related situations for students (Jogarathnam & Buchanan, 2004) and a range of pedagogical issues associated with WIL (Collins, 2001; Fleming, Martin, Hughes, & Zinn, 2009; Martin et al., 2010; Martin, Rees, Edwards, & Levina, 2012). The case study being presented in this paper will address most of these problems.

## Study Context

Kenvale College is a registered training organisation (RTO) and a founding member of The Australian Association of Hotel Schools (AAHS). Established in 1971, Kenvale College (the College) is Australia’s first private hospitality college. It is a non-profit institution targeting mainly domestic students, international students being only approximately five per cent of the student cohort. Its underlying ethos is a holistic approach to education.

Since its foundation, the College has offered a concurrent model of work industry placement which has delivered a 100 per cent graduate employment record. This achievement has been made possible by the College’s positioning context: small student intake, a personalised approach to education,

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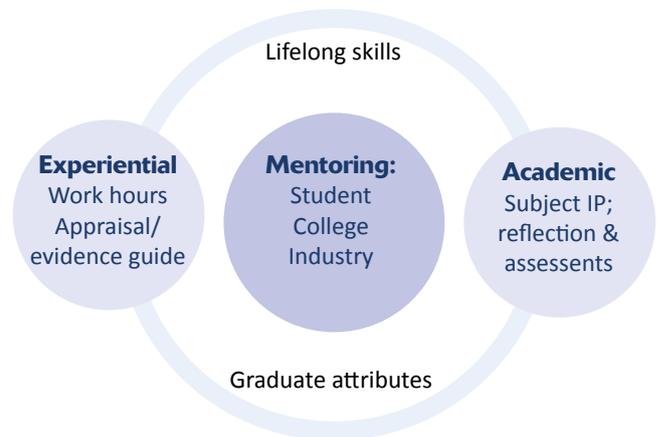
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an active mentoring system, and its geographical location in Sydney which provides easy access to a range of hospitality industry organisations. While the WIL concurrent approach has been part of the College’s history, it has not always been as structured or formalised as presented in this study.

The College’s paid industry placement has three components: experiential, academic and mentoring, with mentoring being the bridge between the academic and the experiential as demonstrated in Figure 1. For the experiential component, students undertake work at an approved hospitality establishment which provides proof of the hours worked, industry work appraisal, and a competency evidence report. The academic component requires students to enrol in an industry placement subject each semester, with their final grade based on ongoing reflective journals and workplace and personal goals assessments, refer to Table 1. The model assumes a three-way partnership between the student, the workplace, and Kenvale College. This requires all parties in the relationship to assume responsibilities and perform specific functions, while giving them the opportunity to achieve benefits as a result of their involvement.

**Figure 1:**  
Kenvale College’s WIL model.



The model, based on current best WIL practices, is drawn from the literature and augmented by a formalised approach to work placement as well as a mentoring system. An explanation

**Figure 2:**

*Stakeholders’ responsibilities and benefits in Kenvale College’s WIL model.*

Kenvale College	Student	Industry Establishment
<p><b>Responsibilities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Procure and approve establishment</li> <li>Enrol and follow student for all academic needs</li> <li>Liaise with student services for support</li> </ul>	<p><b>Responsibilities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Exercise high professional, ethical &amp; technical skills</li> <li>Negotiate a realistic schedule of experiences</li> <li>Enrol and follow all academic policies</li> <li>Provide all required documentation to the College</li> </ul>	<p><b>Responsibilities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have an understanding of nature of WIL</li> <li>Exercise high professional, ethical &amp; technical guidance</li> <li>Negotiate a realistic schedule of experiences</li> <li>Provide to the College required documentation</li> </ul>
<p><b>Functions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide ongoing feedback</li> <li>Establish clear link with mentoring services of the College</li> </ul>	<p><b>Functions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide ongoing feedback</li> <li>Use mentoring services of the College</li> </ul>	<p><b>Functions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide ongoing feedback</li> <li>Provide a setting for student’s professional &amp; personal growth</li> </ul>
<p><b>Benefits</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have clear growth and progression of graduate attributes</li> <li>Have clear implementation, evaluation and improvement action plan</li> </ul>	<p><b>Benefits</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have a clear understanding of graduate attributes</li> <li>Have a clear work pathway by the time I finish College</li> <li>Have many industry links and partnerships</li> <li>Having learnt to apply theory and practice</li> <li>Having learnt to network with industry</li> </ul>	<p><b>Benefits</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Employees who are committed to the industry</li> <li>Have an opportunity to develop the future workforce</li> <li>Have an opportunity to liaise with other industry partners, network and possible benchmarking activities</li> </ul>

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of the industry placement process and the responsibilities of the College, the student and the industry in the three-way partnership (as outlined in Figure 2), as well as course outlines were arranged and summarised in a handbook. The mentors are pivotal to this process, therefore they receive an induction,

ongoing professional development, and a mentor's handbook. Mentors have an important role in linking the formal and experiential learning. They mark and comment weekly on the students' reflective learning journals, and provide continual feedback on the process.

**Table 1:**

*WIL subjects and assessments.*

Subject code	Assessment types & grading	Learning objectives
HOS22 & CUA11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflective Journal – 70% of final mark. Due dates in student calendar.</li> <li>• Organisation Structure Assignment – 30% of final mark. Due date week 8. Assessment criteria in outline.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflect upon workplace learning and integrate academic and practical knowledge.</li> <li>• Reflect on-action after an event.</li> <li>• Describe a workplace organisation.</li> </ul>
HOS23 & CUA15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflective Journal – 70% of final mark. Due dates in student calendar.</li> <li>• Department Structure Assignment – 30% of final mark. Due date week 8. Assessment criteria in outline.</li> <li>• Workplace Appraisal Report as per industry requirements.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflect upon workplace learning and integrate academic and practical knowledge.</li> <li>• Reflect on-action after an event.</li> <li>• Describe a department within the organisation.</li> </ul>
HOS24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Event Reflective Journal (5 events) – 60% of final mark. Due dates in student calendar.</li> <li>• Human Resources Assignment – 40% of final mark. Due date week 8. Assessment criteria in outline.</li> <li>• Workplace Appraisal Report as per industry requirements.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Notice events in one's workplace.</li> <li>• Make sense of events.</li> <li>• Make meaning. What does this event mean/impact on me?</li> <li>• Work with meaning, thinking about why I do things in the workplace, identify my attitude and disposition.</li> <li>• Transform my learning. The reflective learning process leads one to change, go deeper, get more personal meaning.</li> </ul>
HOS25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Career Reflective Journal Report – 20% of final mark. Assessment criteria in outline.</li> <li>• Career Goal Assessment – 40% of final mark. Assessment criteria in outline.</li> <li>• Career Action Plan – 40% of final mark. Assessment criteria in outline.</li> <li>• Workplace Appraisal Report as per industry requirements.</li> <li>• Evidence Report for SITHIND003A.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish a set of career goals – guided personal reflection.</li> <li>• Establish a skills development plan for the next 3 years.</li> </ul>
CUA20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Event Reflective Learning Journal (5 leadership events).</li> <li>• Workplace Appraisal Report as per industry requirements.</li> <li>• Complete Commercial Cookery log book – 100% of final mark.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep records of employment history.</li> <li>• Keep records of units of competency achieved.</li> <li>• Keep records of industry placement log book. Maintain a reflective journal. Establish a training plan.</li> </ul>
CUA25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As per HOS25 plus Commercial Cookery log book.</li> <li>• Workplace Appraisal Report as per industry requirements.</li> <li>• Evidence Report for SITHIND001B / SITHCCC027A.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish a set of career goals – guided personal reflection on current skills, knowledge, attitudes, experience and career/life goals.</li> <li>• Establish a skills development plan for the next 3 years.</li> </ul>

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## Method

Action research takes place in real world situations and aims to solve real problems (Torbert, 2001), and is “a systematic inquiry that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical and undertaken by participants in the inquiry” (McCutcheon & Jung, 1990, p. 148). This case study follows the cyclical action research model of diagnosing the problem: action planning (i.e. evaluating alternative courses of action), taking action (i.e. selecting a course of action), evaluating (i.e. studying the alternatives of a course of action), and specifying learning (i.e. identifying general findings) (Susman & Evered, 1978). The problem was how to make industry placement more meaningful for the students and how to integrate it better with other components of the course. Research and theory informed the options and the action taken. The process and the outcomes were evaluated and these informed the ongoing process of improvement and dissemination of the research.

The participants included all three stakeholders: students, industry, and College mentoring staff. Mentoring staff undertook induction and feedback sessions. Selected industry establishments were consulted and made aware of the formalisation of WIL as a College subject. Industry was supported through an informal induction by the Industry Placement Manager which included an explanation of the work appraisal and evidence report. At enrolment students received the course induction during which their rights and responsibilities were explained. They also received academic and personal support while enrolled in the subjects from February to June 2012.

Permission was received from 42 students to analyse 225 reflective learning journal entries, 75 entries from second year journals and 150 entries from first year journals. The second year learning journals required a deeper reflection corresponding to the learning objectives and assessments for the second year subjects.

Feedback was obtained from six mentors via a semi-structured interview based on the following questions:

- Do you think using reflective journals helped with mentoring?
- Do you think using reflective journals helped students’ personal development?
- What did you find useful/good about this system?
- What did you find bad/impractical about this system?
- Have you got any suggestions to improve the mentoring process?

Industry data were collected in the form of workplace appraisals and employer satisfaction surveys. The appraisal

forms were designed based on the graduate profile of students. Ten workplace appraisals were used in this study.

Action research is a cyclical process leading to continued improvement. In terms of improvement, the next stage is seeking a better elearning platform for the WIL subjects as the current elearning platform takes too long to upload the reflective journals.

## The Work-integrated Learning Process

Although workplace learning in both vocational and higher education learning, especially in hospitality, has been practised for decades (Damonte & Varden, 1987), concurrent formal learning and industry placement does not seem prevalent. Industry placements generally take the form of an internship: short-term practical work that has a clear link with industry (Aggett & Busby, 2011; Zopiatis, 2007); sandwich or block placements that have periods of full-time study and full-time work (Busby et al., 1997; Walmsley et al., 2006) or work experience, practicum or cooperative education that is often described as work-intergraded learning (Martin et al., 2010; Waryszack, 1999).

Industry placement is generally valued by the education providers as it enhances the learning experience (Busby et al., 1997) and facilitates keeping abreast of industry trends and development (Zopiatis, 2007). It is valued by industry as a source of semi-skilled and inexpensive labour (Mulcahy, 1999), especially during peak seasons, and as an opportunity to train and mentor the next generation of leaders (Zopiatis, 2007). Students value it because it provides them with the industry experience required for employment (Mulcahy, 1999) and with professional growth opportunities (Zopiatis, 2007). The industry placement bridges the gap between practice and theory (Zopiatis, 2007) and facilitates the development of “soft”, employability skills that are difficult to learn and acquire in a formal teaching environment (Fleming et al., 2009). All three stakeholder partners were fundamental to the success of this WIL model and their responsibilities, functions and benefits were outlined to them at the beginning of the process:

- Industry establishments were consulted about their involvement and level of commitment and their role in the development of the students’ graduate skills.
- Students were inducted about the role of work-integrated learning in the development of skills as well as their responsibilities in the learning model.
- College staff and mentors were recruited with the intent of ongoing follow-up of students’ reflective activity and industry

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- feedback. An evaluation was carried out with staff after the first semester.

For both industry and College staff, the starting point was that this program incorporated “a component of experiential learning in an authentic workplace setting that provided an effective means for developing a comprehensive skill set desired by potential employers” (Fleming et al., 2009, p. 189-190).

Work-integrated learning within the hospitality and events industry is a complex process which can lead to tensions that can involve both positive and negative experiences (Mulcahy, 1999). Findings identified tensions for all three stakeholders, as demonstrated by the following direct quotations taken from the journal entries, appraisals, surveys and the interview. For students, the “real” nature of work processes can give rise to tension due to lack of experience: “I was a bit nervous plating because this was my first dinner ...” or “I was a little rushed and flustered from being rushed”. For College staff, expectations can affect their input in the overall process: “I did discuss things with students ... there is scope for more structure ...”. For industry partners, the ability to both coach and train in employability skills can lead to both positive and negative tensions: “Would like to see the student use resources that are available to her, i.e. co-workers, asking advice, challenging herself and occasionally greater urgency about her work” or “Although very early in her career, she already demonstrates a lot of positive aspects and nothing that requires radical change ...”.

The level of commitment of all stakeholders can also have an impact on the quality of a WIL industry experience (Zopiatis, 2007). In this study, the level of commitment from industry was made possible by having a formal written agreement between the establishment and the College. This was preceded by an induction process initiated by the Industry Placement Manager. In certain cases where students procured their own casual employment, there was no formal agreement but rather an informal consensus based on the same written material. The student’s commitment was ensured through formal enrolment into a graded subject.

Other process-related issues can be equity of access, varying stakeholder expectations and resourcing limitations (Patrick et al., 2008). There have been few problems with equity of access because of the geographical location of the College and because most students were domestic students. In most cases there has been a longstanding partnership between the College and the industry establishments, and this may have facilitated fewer problems associated with varying expectations. Given the priority of industry placements in the program, the College has committed resources to the WIL program.

Zopiatis (2007) found that education providers put all their effort into finding placements rather than into the planning, organising and implementation of the experiential learning. In this case study, the College has been able to formalise the planning, assessment and evaluation components of WIL. Previously WIL did not have a formalised structure involving mentoring and academic input, and thus the learning experience was not fully validated.

Mulcahy (1999) argues that successful industry placements require: communication and integration; a commitment to training; a willingness by industry to pay; as well as both education providers and industry sharing responsibility for the quality of the industry placement. Zopiatis (2007) found that student industry placements generally lacked “sufficient clarity and purpose, appropriate academic assessment and industry recognition and effective integration with the rest of the hospitality curriculum” (p. 68). This WIL model has a three-way partnership where all partners have responsibilities, functions and benefits which are put in writing. Furthermore, student learning outcomes and workplace appraisal are given to students during the orientation period, using an Industry Placement Handbook, as suggested by Collins (2001). From the students’ perspective, their industry placement is integrated and part of their formal learning.

Collins (2001) suggests that a good administrative system which monitors placements, reviews students’ progress during placements, and links industry experience to a formal grading system will contribute to the success of the program. All these suggestions are part of the College’s current model. Students have a course outline per semester of study managed by the course coordinator and monitored through the mentoring system. In addition, Martin, Rees, Edwards, and Levina (2012) claim that industry experience is effective “when it is woven through the entire fabric of a program of study as an assessed activity, threading the theoretical knowledge and learning outcomes with an understanding of professional practice and expectations and the competencies necessary to be successful” (p. 24). In this case structured preparation and clear guidelines supported the application of learning along with experiential learning being carefully monitored, leading to articulated learning goals and evidence of active reflection on the learning experience (Zopiatis, 2007).

However, industry experience while studying has another purpose besides experiential learning and that is to enhance graduate employment outcomes through skills acquisition

**“The level of commitment of all stakeholders can also have an impact on the quality of a WIL industry experience.”**

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(Martinet al., 2012; Walmsley et al., 2006). Research has shown that industry placements enhanced customer service skills and increased confidence (Busby et al., 1997). Following consultation with industry, the College has included in its graduate profile both soft and practical skills. The graduate attributes in the profile include: communication and social skills, problem solving, initiative and enterprise, self-management, and service orientation. Each and every one of Kenvale College's graduate profile skills forms part of the mentoring and discussion structure of the program, the learning context of the industry placement subject, and the workplace appraisal form.

## Reflective Practice

Martin, Fleming, Ferkins, Wierma, and Coll (2010) investigated pedagogical approaches that foster and integrate student learning between the workplace and the classroom setting. They found that "there was minimal evidence of direct explicit attempts to integrate on-and-off campus learning although all parties expected this would occur and agreed it should occur" (p. 35). However, they did find implicit and indirect integration through discussion and reflection on industry placement back at the education institution, which was when the real processing and learning took place.

Reflection is an important component of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and central to work-integrated learning experiences (Eames & Cates, 2004). One mentor in this study noted "I like that it makes them think about what's going on at work". Reflection can take place before action (Gibbs, 1988) or can be reflection-in-action, thinking about what one is doing while one is doing it, and reflection on action which takes place after the event (Martin et al., 2010).

Informed by research and building upon its historical tradition, Kenvale College has established a program of reflection that leads to the progressive development of skills over the duration for the course (generally two years). The program proceeds as follows:

### *Year 1 students:*

- Reflect upon workplace learning and integrate academic and practical knowledge.
- Reflect on-action after an event.

Some examples from the learning journals are quoted below:

I learnt that when working in a kitchen, you must work together as a team. This ensures that your job is a lot easier and less stressful.

The most interesting thing I learnt this week was the making of the mashed potatoes. This is because I am normally accustomed to boiling the potatoes before they are mashed and passed through the sieve. However, at the hotel this is not the case. I learnt that different potatoes require different cooking methods. For example at the hotel we use Pontiac potatoes which are very moist; consequently we roast the potatoes on a bed of rock salt in order to absorb the excess moisture that is present. Once the potatoes are put through the sieve, cream is added and then double the amount of butter is added. This is quite a unique method of making mashed potatoes which is very interesting.

After working this week I have experienced a different side of a food and beverage attendant. It has provided me with a different perception of my role in the workplace.

As I began to work more often this week I found out that though most people are helpful and welcoming, there are a few that don't contribute as much as others even though they may have been in the industry longer. This changed my thoughts slightly of the xxx workplace community.

I was surprised how much food wastage occurs at xxx. I wasn't exactly sure what happened with food wastage, but I am now aware that all food is thrown out. I find this very surprising and very strange, as I thought it could have been distributed to homeless shelters or organisations once the food is no longer needed

### *Year 2 students:*

- Notice events in the workplace.
- Make sense of events.
- Make meaning (i.e. what does this event mean to me, how does it impact on me?).
- Work with meaning (i.e. thinking about why I do things in the workplace, thinking about what is going on and identifying my attitude and disposition: am I doing this because I have to? Am I doing it for another person, either to impress them, or to serve them? etc.).
- Transform my learning (i.e. the reflective learning process leads one to change or to go deeper and get more personal meaning from the workplace).
- Establish a set of career goals (i.e. guided personal reflection on current skills, knowledge, attitudes, experience and career/life goals).
- Establish a skills development plan for the next three years.

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Examples from the learning journals are quoted below:

Like all events, they will be different. Guests may be more difficult, more demanding, more serene, you never know. What I liked about this event was that everyone was enjoying themselves, and the food and the beverages and the view. We like that we can bring a service of not just what is expected, but go beyond expectations and exceed and leave a lasting impression, of a wow factor.

Our back of house has had this problem for a while now, so in saying that we are learning to work with it instead of complaining. Working as a team comes with time, so I think the more we work together, we're just going to get stronger and stronger in team work and reliability...

I'm still a little shy when it comes to communicating with customers and I get flustered a little when I talk to them for an extended amount of time. I'd like to be a little faster, sometimes I'm a little slow when I need to think of things, it slows me down sometimes. But I think that with time comes experience and in due time I will learn to be better in the way I work, both as a team and individual.

Working in this department was excellent as I learnt new skills as well as worked with different members within my work place. The only bad things that I could recall was that we were short staffed, but we managed as a team to get through this. Also not knowing where everything was stored and little details within this department started off a bit slow but throughout the night I had learnt where items were kept and details like cover numbers and their service sequence.

In terms of career goals the following is an example from the learning journals:

I have learnt that I want to focus my future career on the events and planning sides of functions, rather than the hospitality and cookery aspect. I still enjoy hospitality but much prefer the organisational side of events.

The progressive reflective pathway outlined above requires a high personnel investment from both the College (mentors, academic staff and an Industry Placement Manager) as well as industry placement (training commitment, workplace appraisal and competency evidence). This process was flagged (Busby et al., 1997; Waryszack, 1999) as a key factor in the development of a best practice framework to manage industry placement (Zopiatis, 2007). Despite the high personal investment on behalf of staff, they find it very supportive, as one mentor explained:

Yes definitely, it has helped me to understand better where the students are at in their professional

development and what specific issues both good and bad can arise in their individual workplaces. It also shows more in depth what training the students may be getting, the variety of types of work as well as their specific workplaces.

Writing ongoing reflective journals about work-based situations helps students to internalise work-related information, values and attitudes, as another mentor identifies:

Sometimes they express themselves more and better through the journal, which is beneficial for mentoring as it allows them to better connect the purpose of their learning.

Students' reflections are both shared with their mentor and assessed by the course coordinator.

The study found that there are many factors leading to a student perceiving a work-based learning environment as positive or negative. This WIL model does not directly solve all the problems associated with this perception and with student learning generally, but investigates some problems and facilitates the search for a solution. Furthermore, the literature provides evidence that when expectations of industry placements are not met, this leads to dissatisfaction and a poor quality experience (Chao, 2006; Lam & Chung, 2006; Walmsley et al., 2006).

## Experiential Learning and Career Choices

In designing the experiential learning associated with industry placement, students need to be given the opportunity to reflect formally and informally on their experience and to integrate and apply theory and practice (Zopiatis, 2007). The scope of Kenvale College's experiential learning is not limited to its reflective practice but also includes: evidence of hours worked; a workplace appraisal; and, more importantly, a competency evidence report carried out by the student and validated by the establishment.

In the WIL process, it has also been found that at times industry does not provide students with meaningful work, a positive learning environment or a qualified on-the-job supervisor during their placement. This has led to a widening of the gap between students' knowledge, career expectations and the reality of employment in the sector. The nature of concurrent employment allows industry to invest in students because their employment is constant from week to week. Research has found that when hospitality industry placements fail to deliver learning opportunities students no longer select hospitality as their career of first choice (Barron & Maxwell, 1993; Callan, 1997; Jenkins, 2001; Kelley-Patterson & George,

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2001). The reflective learning journals help students to process new experiences and difficulties. They give them the opportunity to stand back and look with some objectivity at the negative situation, as the following reflection highlights:

There is a large political component related to the workplace which I was hoping did not exist. I would personally prefer a workplace where everyone treats one another like a family; however, this is not the case. Many people talk about others in the workplace and gossip a lot. They approach me and tell me these things, but I just ignore them as I don't want to get involved in the political side of the kitchen, instead, I want to focus on learning as much as I can and gaining experience.

## Conclusion

This paper has outlined some of the problems associated with the implementation of WIL, such as: lack of clarity in expectation and goals from students, industry and education providers (Mulcahy, 1999; Zopiatis, 2007); various levels of commitment, resources and perceptions from all three stakeholders involved (Patrick et al., 2008; Zopiatis, 2007); and non-meaningful work provided by industry (Chao, 2006; Lam & Chung, 2006; Walmsley et al., 2006). The purpose was to evaluate the effectiveness of Kenvale College's latest iteration of a WIL model. The College has always had a combined work-study learning approach based on the holistic development of the person, but this action research case study describes how the latest model has been informed by the research to address common problems associated with WIL.

The action research presented here led to an improved structure to support the WIL model through: a graded base structure using existing reports and adding a reflective component to integrate the formal and experiential components of learning; preliminary and ongoing work with industry partners to align expectations regarding both training and personal development, supported by an industry placement manual; and empowering mentors (College staff), through induction and training, to monitor the students' industry experience and to be the link between the College, the students and industry.

The key success factor for all three stakeholders in this WIL process is the identification and acquisition of established graduate attributes backed up by a mentoring system. This WIL model is distinctive and perceived to be more effective than other models because of its holistic approach to teaching and learning, which is demonstrated by the integration of academic and experiential learning and communicated to all three stakeholders at the outset. It also emphasises the development of soft graduate skills (graduate employability skills) by

communicating the graduate profile to all three stakeholders. The students are provided with learning goals, progressive reflection, assessment and evaluation.

WIL is a complex process involving three very different stakeholders: students, industry and education providers. The nature of concerns varies across all three partners; however, there are three main areas which play an important role in the development and solution of possible complex situations. First, the establishment of clear guidelines for all three parties involved. These guidelines should include responsibilities, functions and benefits, and should be clearly fixed at the beginning of the WIL engagement. Second, the level of commitment — how this is applied for each stakeholder differs. In the case of the education provider, a good administrative system supporting both staff and students taking part in work-integrated learning; in the case of industry, a committed approach to training and assessment; and in the case of the student, a committed method to self-directed learning. Third, all three stakeholders need to account for the personal investment the process requires. For students, the reflective learning process requires regularly writing reflective journal entries; for the College, it requires members of staff taking on different roles; and for industry, it means a demand for personnel who are prepared to undertake the training and coaching of students.

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