

# The Community Internship – A Cohesive Collection of Placement Interventions



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## 1 Enhancing WIL

Work-integrated Learning (WIL) is an approach that higher education institutions in Australia adopt to support students in developing their professional skills (Patrick et al., 2008). It is considered one of the most effective ways of preparing students for the workplace (Goulter & Patrick, 2010). However, when the structured work placement format is applied to the design of a service-learning (SL) experience there are opportunities for deeper and broader development than just students' professional identities. Such an approach enables Universities to achieve the goal of supporting students to become more than “just trained workers” to become “human beings” in the fullest sense of those words with “good citizenship” being the outcome (Palmer et al., 2010). The Community Internship Course is a SL program structured as a WIL shell course which accommodates students from any discipline, working in a range of not-for-profit organisations. This course has been designed to raise students' awareness of their growing identity, both professional and personal, resulting from their community-based experiences. Although there are many opportunities there has been no explicit way in which to measure this awareness and transformation. This chapter describes this unique SL shell course and its design and it discusses the elements which perform as interventions to support students' recognition of opportunities for growth. The nature of translative learning is discussed, followed by analysis of students' responses, including student feedback from the final intervention; a survey which invites students to one final reflective

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opportunity. It concludes by reflecting on the student responses and how they demonstrate the effectiveness of the cohesive collection of post-practicum interventions which make up this course.

## 2 A Uniquely Accessible Placement Model

The dominant purpose of work-integrated learning (WIL) in Australia, also known as placement experience is instrumental in focus, and reflects technical skills and work-readiness agendas. However, there is a growing concern in higher education that a focus on work skills do not constitute as holistic an education as graduates will need to face the challenges of the future (Palmer et al., 2010). There is an emerging understanding of the role of universities in also advancing citizenship (Harkavy, 2006), and the related need to develop graduates who are not only technically capable, but also socially-aware and community-minded citizens who are capable to face the challenges of global, complex problems by thinking, acting or seeing the world in new ways (Palmer et al., 2010). Service-learning has been identified as one means of achieving this (Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997), and Astin, Sax, and Avalos (2003 pp. 256–7) identified that “service participation positively affects students’ commitment to their communities, to helping others in difficulty, to promoting racial understanding, and to influencing social values”. They also assert that SL nurtures the “development of important life skills such as leadership ability, social self-confidence, critical thinking skills, and conflict resolution skills”, as well as “unique positive effects on academic development, including knowledge gained, grades earned, degrees sought after, and time devoted to academic endeavours”.

Thus, in 2012, Griffith University implemented a university-wide SL program, the Community Internship (CI) course. Initially this course was offered as a free-choice elective where students volunteer in not-for-profit organisations, while studying human rights, the role of citizens in the community and social justice. In the following eight years, it has been adopted as a core course (unit/subject) or a recommended elective in a large number of degrees, while still being available as a free-choice elective to all students. Around 600 students enrol in the course each year and it has been awarded one state award, and two national awards (2016, 2017). For a sustained and demonstrably effective whole-of-university approach to concurrently enhance students’ employability and their on-going civic engagement.) This chapter describes the philosophical underpinnings of the course development and reports on research conducted with students to establish their perceptions of the efficacy of the different interventions designed into the course.

One unique element of the course is that it is not attached to any specific disciplinary field in the University, and hence benefits from the freedom to facilitate students’ development beyond those mandated for discipline-based work-readiness.

Furthermore, it specifically develops the Griffith Graduate attribute of being socially responsible and engaged in their communities. Fundamental to the course design was the endeavour to respond to the variety of challenges known to be inherent in many WIL opportunities as identified in The WIL Report (Patrick et al., 2008), with many of those challenges still being identified more recently by Universities Australia and their collaborators in their National Strategy on Work Integrated Learning in University Education (2015) and in the Universities Australia Work Integrated Learning in Universities Report in 2019. The challenge most specifically addressed in the CI course is that of ensuring equity and access, with its identified specific equity groups:

- (a) International students
- (b) Employed students/students with family responsibilities
- (c) Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds
- (d) Students with a disability
- (e) Indigenous students
- (f) Students in regional and remote areas

The internship opportunities are not competitive, in so far as students are guaranteed an internship regardless of their academic achievement. Students select from a range of available internships, or can nominate an opportunity themselves, which can be tailored to their employment and family responsibilities, any disabilities, or their desire to complete the course overseas, interstate or regionally. Where available, specific opportunities requiring indigenous students are developed with community partners.

### 3 Cohesive Course Design

The course has been designed as a cohesive collection of post-practicum interventions to encourage and scaffold a reflection on both the professional and personal aspects of students' experience and guide them to a greater understanding of themselves, their community and their advantages and responsibilities resulting from advantage. Literature indicates that WIL programs and SL environments enhance students' awareness and development of professional and personal skills through exposure to opportunities in the workplace and the community respectively (Kieley, 2005; Mezirow, 1997; Schor, Cattaneo, & Calton, 2017). By combining exposure to workplaces and the community the CI course facilitates transforming student's perspectives about themselves and the world (Mezirow, 1991, 2016) to focus not only on becoming a capable professional but also a socially responsible citizen (Palmer et al., 2010).

Students in the course are provided with the opportunity to volunteer at one of a range of not-for-profit organisations. In addition to completing a minimum of 50 h, volunteering in the organisation, the course requires students to critically reflect on their personal and professional skills through individual, written and oral academic assessments through the lenses of human rights, community and citizenship, theories of social justice and a growing understanding of personal privilege. These assessment tasks are designed take advantage of the self-directed learning that is facilitated by students’ voluntary engagement in self-reflection (Cranton, 2016) and supports students to identify their personal and professional growth and the potentially transformative learning that they take from this experience. Collaboration is an important element in the assessment process. Structured activities and peer discussions conducted in workshops offer students a chance to discuss and share their experience which is a powerful form of reflection. Students are supported by both an Academic Advisor as well as a designated supervisor at the community organisation. The high level of scaffolding and support provided by the course design fosters a supportive and safe environment for reflection and growth (Fig. 1).

With the internship design comes a range of challenges and affordances required to facilitate intended learning outcomes that will ensure the experiences “serve as bridges between the curriculum and the world outside the classroom, where problems are ill structured and the stakes are often high for communities and students alike (Fitch, Steinke, & Hudson, 2013 p. 57).” The design and assessment are influenced by four key parameters, that is; it must be available as a free choice elective, it must be flexible, students must volunteer in a not-for-profit organisation that supports disadvantage or the planet and it must follow good practice guidelines for WIL and SL:

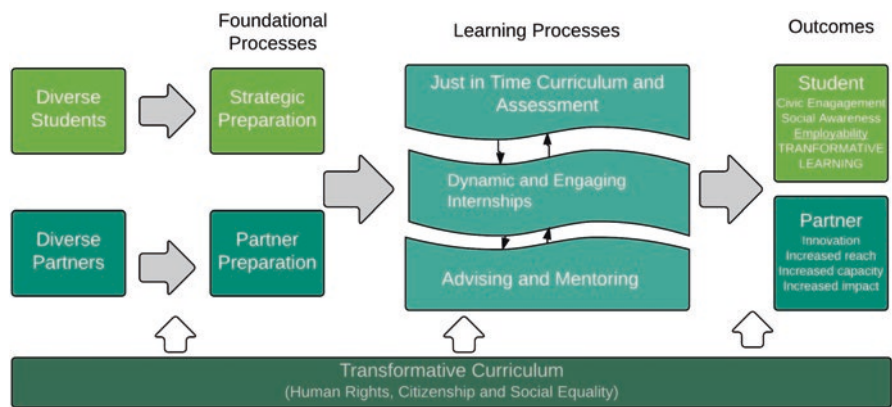


Fig. 1 Community internship system

### ***3.1 Free Choice Elective***

The Community Internship course is designed as a free choice elective shell course available across all undergraduate university degree programs. It is also embedded as listed electives or core units, and is a core requirement in some degrees and is available to postgraduate students. Students who have successfully completed two full semesters of their program are able to enrol. This creates a student group that is both varied in its disciplines as well as in the level of achievement within their degree program i.e. a second year accounting student as well as a fourth year bio-medical student could enrol in the course at the same time. It also means the course needs to be accessible and appropriately challenging for students across the full-range of academic abilities. This necessitates that the course and assessment be generic and non-discipline specific as the course cannot guarantee a discipline-based experience in terms of discipline-related content, but does guarantee the opportunity for the growth of transferable professional and personal skills. The proof of the appropriateness of the course design for students from all disciplines is evidenced through its adoption across a range of disciplines as a recommended elective or core course. However, with the diversity of students comes the need for flexibility.

### ***3.2 Flexibility***

The internship experiences require the flexibility to manage not only the diverse student group but also the wide variety of community partners who accommodate them. The partners represent a range of different community sectors addressing a broad scope of community needs such as, families, disability, health, animal welfare, and environment with a large range of discipline-related or generic roles or projects being offered to students. Partners needs also vary from observational type roles to full para-professional interaction with clients or roles whereby a level of discipline expertise may be required e.g. social media/marketing skills. Flexibility in terms of offering students a range of internship opportunities is also critical, especially for those students enrolling in the course as a core degree requirement. In the provision of an SL experience, like most placement courses, the outcomes and impacts vary greatly between students and placement organisations. Even students who attend the same placement experience it in vastly different ways because they are taking individual responsibility for their learning within the specific context of their role or project (Fitch et al., 2013). To design an effective SL course, as with any curriculum, it is important course work, assessment, structure and support guide students to the achieve the same broad learning outcomes, however, unlike other non WIL courses there is the additional requirement of providing equitable experience for the students by minimizing the impact of the variability of placement organisations. and experiences (Cooper, Orrell, & Bowden, 2010, Ferns & Moore, 2012, Hodges, 2011 and Yorke, 2006).

### 3.3 *Volunteering*

In focusing on whole person development this course aims to encourage students to understand their role within the community by placing them in volunteering positions in areas of need within not-for-profit organisations. These not-for-profit organisations provide students with disorienting dilemmas, via the opportunity to be exposed to experiences that highlight their own privilege and the significance of these organisations in addressing these issues within society. The course intends for students to recognise the importance of volunteers in helping these organisations survive and provide community-improving outcomes. While all WIL-type experiences have the advantage of influencing the development of life skills, and motivating students to a different level of academic engagement, SL in particular is known to achieve a transformation in students in relation to their understanding of the role that service to community plays in creating a more cohesive understanding of community (Astin et al., 2003).

### 3.4 *Good Practice*

The design of the course and its assessment follow good practice guidelines for both WIL placements as well as the requirements of sound reflective practices inherent to SL curricula to ensure an equitable and effective learning experience for students. The WIL Report (Patrick et al., 2008) distilled some of the elements identified as essential for good practice WIL; preparation of stakeholders, appropriate supervision and sufficient mentoring arrangements. The report also identified “clearly defined and tailored assessment methods and strategies for evaluation and quality assurance...as important elements of a well-designed WIL curriculum” (p. 40).

Cooper et al. (2010) built upon these elements and developed seven key dimensions of WIL to be considered when designing curriculum.

- Purpose – Defining goals, expectations and intended outcomes for each of the WIL stakeholder groups.
- Context: The workplace – Appreciating different contexts that students are exposed to in the workplace as well as understanding that “the value of workplaces is that they can provide sites for learning vocational, professional, disciplinary and service expertise”. (p. 40)
- Integration- Ensuring integration i.e. “the process of bringing together formal learning and productive work, or theory and practice, to give students a complete, integrated learning experience”. (p. 40)
- Curriculum – Aligning all course and assessment with intended outcomes.
- Learning – Structuring the course and assessment to foster learning. “Learning begins with experiences that allow participants to observe, review and reflect on what they have practised”. (p. 41)

- Partnerships – Working with industry. “It is not possible to have work integrated learning without strong partnerships between industry and educational institutions”. (p. 41)
- Support – Providing support to stakeholders. “Students and workplaces require support before, during and after any work integrated learning programmes. Students come to higher education with diverse and unique experiences. Support can take a variety of forms, from practical and administrative assistance to educational and emotional support”. (p. 42)

SL requires many of the same elements as WIL for good practice but must be designed to equally benefit provider as well as the recipient of the service (Kraft & Eyer, 2002). Scott and Graham (2015) add that SL, in addition to explicit learning goals, also requires responding to community needs, student judgement and consistent reflection by the student. Chambers and Lavery (2017), describe the five interdependent stages which are integral for the implementation of service-learning and could similarly be ascribed to effective WIL: investigation, preparation, action, reflection, and demonstration. While ensuring that these good practice guidelines for WIL and SL are met the course also ensures that students are provided with, and are cognizant of, opportunities for ongoing personal and professional growth. These are embedded within the design as a cohesive collection of interventions to raise student awareness of the impact of the learning opportunities within the course beyond the completion of their placement.

## 4 Designing and Activating the Interventions

The Community Internship course created a collection of interventions to capture and enhance a sense of growing and potential transformation of personal and professional identity developed over the progression of their placement experience. In the design of these tools the intention is to create an opportunity for transformation and a recognition by students of this change. To enable this, it is important to provide opportunities for students to be offered “powerful participatory experiences” to support their development of new ways of viewing their world and to focus on increasing a student’s sense of self-efficacy and agency in terms of how to handle their new world views (Yates & Younnis, 1996).

### 4.1 *Self-Efficacy and Agency*

Universities equip students with a broad range of skills, however, entering the workplace and successfully transferring the learned skills is not necessarily a simple process for all students. To be able to develop skills, it is essential to have a sense of self-efficacy, which Bandura (1977) defined as one’s belief in their personal

capabilities to succeed in tasks. This means that for students to overcome challenges as presented in new environments, educational as well as professional settings, it is essential to possess a certain sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). Skill application and development by offering, amongst others, ‘mastery experiences’, such as WIL programs, is incredibly effective in increasing self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982). This is in line with Trede, Macklin, and Bridges (2012) higher education literature examination on professional identity development: which concludes that to enhance students’ self-awareness, an active and independent/autonomous (agency) attitude is required to engage in the learning opportunities. Brandenburger (2013) also asserts that service-learning in particular prompts examination of personal agency and identity, drawing on Blasi (1993) to claim it leads to individuals understanding “themselves as responsible or moral persons through being agents in the world” (p. 139). Thus, the design of the intervention tool needed to emphasise self-efficacy and agency to enhance the impact of the service-learning experience on a student’s professional growth. However, to raise student awareness of the personal growth and transformational nature of their experience other aspects of the course design required accentuation. Course elements that support self-efficacy and agency are the initial contacts in the workplace required by the student with the community partner to ensure that both are comfortable with the planned internship activities and that through this physical contact, students overcome any disquiet about the novelty of the experience to come. In the first four weeks of the trimester students attend workshops where their allocated academic advisor leads them through what they may expect in the course and they can share as a class all aspects of their internships. These workshops also support them to self-structure the learning opportunities presented by each of their unique internships and the resulting Internship Plan assessment item allows the student to take agency of those learning opportunities. An important design element of the course is the close support students receive from their Academic Advisors which goes beyond the normal tutor-student relationship.

## 4.2 “Disorienting Dilemma”

A key focus of the course is to facilitate a transformational learning experience that expands students’ conception of themselves as citizens. The course is designed to scaffold and emphasise the transformational opportunities of the internship that act as a mechanism to increase awareness of personal and professional development. The SL environment exposes students to new concepts, and, often, such a critical experience causes a ‘disorienting dilemma’ which needs resolving (Mezirow, 2000). In support of this concept Kieley (2005) classified five consecutive stages for students to deal with the discomfort of a confrontation with only the two final stages of processing and connecting leading to transformation. ‘Processing’ occurs on an individual reflection level as well as a social, dialogic learning process, where on both levels the learning opportunity is being problematised, questioned and



analysed. The final ‘connecting’ step is for those previous conclusions/outcomes to be understood within the student’s own/personal environment, and, consequently, results in accepted and adapted new thought patterns. These transformational opportunities encourage students to be autonomous and be their own social agents of change in a collaborative environment which is considered a key aspect for the learner to succeed in a twenty-first century workforce (Mezirow, 1997). Based on these concepts to enhance the concept of transformation and personal development the intervention needs to emphasise how an experience impacted the student’s ability to process and resolve different situations. Core to developing an intervention that incorporated these aspects is one that encourages critical reflection which is discussed next. Other elements in the course that provide the learning opportunities of disorienting dilemmas include the initial lectures which expose students to the concepts of human rights, citizenship and community, and social justice issues. A range of lecture content provides students with rich exposure to the concept of privilege. Critical to the approach of disorienting dilemmas is the personal support of each student by the Academic Advisor role which is another unique aspect of Community Internship course design. The Academic Advisor is proactive in noting and following up all students throughout the course to ensure they are managing their self-efficacy and agency and managing the disorienting dilemmas they confront in the internship, or in the assessment requirements.

### ***4.3 Reflective Thinking***

The model of transformative learning is underpinned by the importance of reflective thinking Mezirow (1991) and Cranton (2016). Through reflection in and on action, the level of personal, professional identity development and, ultimately, transformation can be determined. As Wu and Shek (2018) state, “The process of reflection is also a core component of service-learning. As service-learning is seen as experiential learning and it rests upon the cyclic process of action and reflection on that action, students’ understanding is continuously modified with more experiences, thoughts, and information gained from service delivery” (p. 1510–1511). The academic component of the course requires students to critically reflect upon their learning experiences and enhance their awareness of personal and professional identity development. To measure the level of reflective thinking, Kember et al. (2010) introduced a questionnaire where one’s reflective thinking can only lead to a transformation of perspective when it reaches the fourth and final level of critical reflection. Kieley’s (2005) framework suggests that in a service-learning environment the learning occurs by challenging existing mindsets, processing and, ultimately, shifting towards new perspectives. However, without critical reflection experiences can be missed opportunities for learning. In other words, in order to establish whether students have experienced transformational opportunities, critical reflection has to become a purposeful and conscious part of their process. The transformative learning design, therefore, has to embed critical reflection in its design to augment and

establish the effect transformational opportunities have on students' personal and professional identity development. In the CI, reflections are designed at critical points. Students are required to reflect in advance of the internship by predicting their learning opportunities, identifying the need their community organisation responds to in the community, and predicting the personal and professional learning opportunities presented by the experience. Students then reflect in verbal and written form around the middle of the experience. The verbal reflections occur in small groups of no more than five other students where they can support each other to workshop any problems they have met in their internships. Their final reflection is responding to specific reflective questions in their final written assessment.

## 5 Developing the Survey Tool

In the process of designing a survey tool to ascertain personal and professional growth it became evident that it was an opportunity to also create an evaluative tool to capture the effectiveness of the course in providing conditions that enable transformational learning. We adapted the work of Kember, Leung, Jones, Yuen Loke, McKay, Sinclair, Harrison, Webb, Yuet Wong, Wong, and Yeung (2010) who developed a quantitative method for identifying transformation. They used a "combination of the literature review and initial testing [which] led to the development of a four-scale instrument measuring four constructs: habitual action, understanding, reflection and critical reflection". We used these four constructs to create a validity tested survey which was repurposed to suit the CI course as a post-placement intervention tool incorporating elements of self-efficacy and agency and embedding reflection. To capture a reflection on overall experience this intervention's designated implementation was at the end of the course. This was to encourage students to reflect on all elements of the course and how these elements supported their raised awareness of their personal and professional growth. The tool required a format that would complement existing assessment without adding too much to staff assessment workload. The survey asks students 20 questions. The first ten questions were to assist in identifying any potentially influential external factors. The remainder were a Likert scale series of questions on a scale of 1–5 (1 being low and 5 being high) that were based on previous research on capturing transformative learning via quantitative methods. These were specifically designed based on Kember et al.'s (2010) four constructs to engender an increased awareness of their personal and professional growth as well as identify transformational aspects of the internship experience.

To assess the design of this tool, that was to act as both a self-reflection tool as well as a research tool in exploring student's awareness of their professional and personal growth, it was piloted with a smaller number of students to adjust the survey items before its full implementation in the following trimester. The tool was then provided to all students who participated in Trimester 1 and 2 2018 with on-line and paper-based options. The students were from multiple campuses and had

range of different internship workplaces from hands on interaction to clients to more observational roles. It was implemented in the week between their final assessment and the release of their course results so as not to interfere with other assessments and provide the students with an opportunity to have completed the full experience to capture their reflections on the course as a whole. The invitation to participate was sent to students via their Academic Advisors, so that students may be more likely to respond to someone they related to in the course, rather than to a centralised survey request.

## 6 Participants

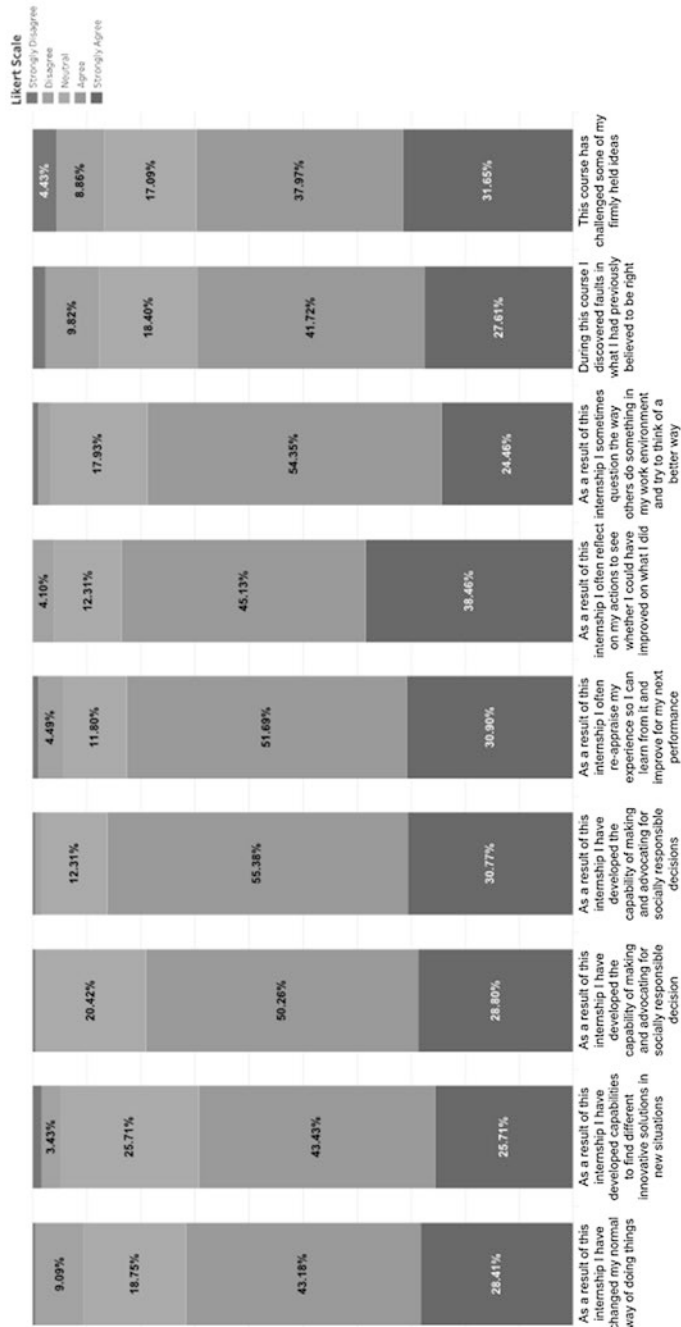
Students were informed and asked to consent prior to their participation, via an electronic ethics cover form, that their participation was voluntary and there would be no impact on their relationship with course staff or their grades. Only those who have consented have been included in these data. There were 54 of the 248 students (22%) in the CI completed the survey. Of these students almost half (40.8%) were over the age of 25 with a range of grade point averages (GPAs), albeit 77.6% had GPAs of 4 or 5 on a 7-point scale. International students represented 26.5% of the respondents, a similar percentage to the enrolment of international students in the course in any delivery period. A range of disciplines across areas of science, health, business, education and arts were represented. In terms of how satisfying their experience was 81.6% of respondents indicated they were either satisfied or extremely satisfied with only 8.1% reporting dissatisfaction.

## 7 Results

In what follows we discuss the results of the nine questions to elicit participants' perceptions of transformative learning, see Table 1.

The first question asked students to state whether, as a result of their internship, they now question the way others do something at work and try to think of a better way. Most students selected the high end (4 or 5) of the scale (69.4%) while less than 1% selected the lower portion (1 or 2) of the scale. This question was followed by one relating to whether students felt that they felt capable of advocating and making socially responsible decisions as a result of their internship. Again, most (79.6%) selected the high end of the scale with less than 1% selecting the low end. Students were asked to identify which parts of the course supported them most with this change. Unsurprisingly, the placement itself was selected by almost all respondents, some also selected lectures (27.3%) workshops (36.4%) and assignments (36.4%). This illustrates that while the placement experience and exposure to the community provide an environment for personal and professional development, students can also recognise the support provided by the course elements to raise student awareness of their

**Table 1** Results of the nine questions relating to transformative learning



changes. Table 1 illustrates that of the students who responded, 73.5% also selected the high end of the scale (4 or 5) in response to the question of whether they like to think over what they have been doing and consider alternative ways of doing things and again less than 1% selected the low end of the scale (1 or 2). However, in response to the question relating to whether this experience had challenged the respondents' firmly held ideas, the responses were distributed more evenly with 51% selecting the high end of the scale while 28.6% selected the low end of the scale. Again, to explore which interventions had this impact on those students that had selected the high end of the scale, student were asked to identify which part of the course had supported them with this change and it was the placement itself (90.6%) that was most reported as being most supportive, but some also identified lectures (9.4%), workshops (28.1), modules (15.6%) and assignments (25%) as also supporting this change.

Students were then asked if the internship experience resulted in them more often re-appraising their experience so they can learn from it and improve their next performance. In response, 69.4% selected the high end of the scale with only 12.2% selecting the lower end of the scale of their participation in this activity. Similarly, although slightly more evenly spread, when respondents were asked whether students had discovered faults in what they had previously believed to be right 53% selected either 4 or 5 with 24.5% selecting either a 1 or 2. This question was also explored further to determine the impact of individual interventions within the course and in addition to the internship which was selected by 87.5% of respondents; lecture (28.1%), workshops (34.4%), modules (15.6%) and assignments (34.4%) were also acknowledge as contributing factors for some. This again illustrates that these interventions are understood by respondents to influence their way of thinking in both a personal and professional capacity.

## 8 Discussion

The survey tool has captured a snap-shot of students' perspectives on their self-efficacy and agency (e.g. questioning the way others do things and trying to think of a better way; and feeling confident to advocate for socially responsible decisions), their reaction to a "disorienting dilemma" (e.g. discovering faults in what they previously perceived to be right, and the development of their reflective thinking skills e.g. reappraising their experience so they can learn and improve). These data provide an insight into respondents' transformations and how they understand the part that the interventions and the placement play in their development. It also demonstrates the type of professional and personal development that takes place during this course and how the interventions are supporting them to become both professionally capable and socially responsible. Based on these results, it could be argued that our participants are developing awareness of their personal and professional growth as a direct result of their internship and the supporting course elements. The results provide evidence that the placement and the course interventions provided a satisfying experience overall. This research confirms that the course interventions

can enable transformational learning and a shift in students' notions of, and actions as responsible citizens. These findings align generally with the published literature on the development of employment choices, leadership skills, commitment to communities and on-going civic engagement for students who have participated in service-learning Astin et al. (2003), Cress, Burack, Giles, Elkins, and Stevens (2010) & Warchal & Ruiz (2004), Limitations of the survey were that the survey was applied after the submission of the students' last piece of assessment. However, at that time students were engaged with finalising assessment for other units of study, and their responsiveness was low. Consideration will be given in future to the survey being applied as an anonymous submission at the same time as submission of the final assessment piece, when students have most recently reflected in their final report on some of the elements contained in the survey.

## 9 Conclusion

This course offers students a cohesive collection of placement interventions. Despite the limitations associated with a small sample, the examined responses indicate that the design of the final intervention tool can engage and guide students to reflect on their personal and professional growth and realise the impact of transformative experiences. It will, however, require further review to ensure that questions are interpreted correctly and better integration within the course to ensure student preparation and participation. The course elements already provide a major focus on personal and professional skill development and the assessment and content of the course provide rich opportunities for students to recognise transformation in their conceptions of themselves and their role in the community, and aid them to become transformative learners who are more reflective; develop inclusive thinking, are more open to difference of opinion, and are able to use new thoughts to guide action (McAllister et al., 2013). The research which produced this chapter enabled an additional post-practicum intervention to be added, which will be embedded intentionally into future course iterations. This enhanced integration into the course will capture and augment students' awareness of how these post-practicum interventions together contribute to a sense of growing personal and professional identity, enhancing their capacity as graduates and as citizens to contribute to creating a better future world.

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