

# Early workplace learning experiences: what are the pedagogical possibilities beyond retention and employability?

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**Abstract** With this paper, we explore early placement experiences and their pedagogical potential, including ways of keeping students enrolled and persisting with their studies. Few university courses offer early placements because traditionally placement experiences have a focus on employability and work readiness of graduates, hence occur towards the end of courses. We conceptualise workplace learning (WPL) as a transition pedagogy that can address university staff's interests in student retention. In this paper the relationship between early WPL experiences and keeping students enrolled and persisting with their learning as well as the pedagogical implications of early WPL experiences are explored. Empirical data of students' interpretations of their early placement experiences demonstrated that beyond motivating students to persist with learning and staying enrolled in the course placement experiences were seen as a highlight of their first year studies. We argue that there are some benefits to students' learning to using early placement experiences within a practice-based curriculum when combined with an explicit and deliberate pedagogy that prepares students for practice-based and lifelong learning approaches to work. We conclude that early WPL experiences at university can be used as a strategy to assist students to transition into these institutions and develop more deliberate learner and professional identities.

**Keywords** Workplace learning · Practicum · First year experience · Pedagogy · Student retention · Transition

## Introduction

Two global issues stimulated us to inquire about the role of early placement experiences at university: increased student attrition rates in the first year of enrolment in university

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courses and a concern that graduates are not work ready. These issues are related to issues of transition, where students' retention is linked to their transition into university, and where graduates' employability is linked to their transition into employment. Our inquiry into what impact early workplace learning (WPL) experiences have on students was also triggered by anecdotal and some empirical data suggesting that graduates regard WPL as one of the most rewarding and relevant experiences of their studies due to its engaged and practice-based nature (Scott 2005). We hypothesised that if WPL experiences are so positively evaluated by graduates then introducing these experiences early in their course might help keep students enrolled and persisting with their studies. Furthermore, introducing WPL experiences early in courses, as opposed to towards the end of courses when it traditionally occurs, might also be a way of ensuring a better integrated practice-based curriculum, where WPL is not seen as an add-on at the end of courses but as a truly embedded component. With this paper, we present the findings from a pilot study that explored early placement experiences and their pedagogical potential, including ways of keeping students enrolled and persisting with their studies.

### **Workplace learning, employability and retention**

WPL has been described as a pedagogical strategy that operates as a bridge between theory and practice and as a way of integrating the world of education with the world of work (Coll and Zegwaard 2011; Cooper et al. 2010). WPL is a practice-based learning and teaching strategy that occurs in authentic workplaces with formal or informal supervision of students by dedicated educators or staff of the given workplace (Higgs 2012). WPL environments offer authentic and unique learning opportunities where students can experience the unpredictability and complexity of work and participate as a newcomer in a community of practice (Blåka and Filstad 2007). Through WPL, students learn to put into practice discipline-specific technical skills and knowledge. WPL is also a professionalisation strategy where by working within existing workplace cultures and professional boundaries and learning to work in teams students try on professional roles and become agentic participants of the future workforce (Higgs 2012).

WPL offers opportunities for experiential, reflective, action-oriented, discursive, participatory, relational and embodied ways of learning (Higgs et al. 2012). These pedagogical approaches are located in social, experiential and reflective learning theories and are seen as more practical and applied than conventional classroom teaching that has traditionally privileged a didactical delivery of content. Many scholars highlighted the connection between individual and social aspects of learning in WPL (Billett 2009; Kemmis and Grootenboer 2008). Exposing students to the socio-cultural aspects of workplaces through WPL invites them to position themselves and develop their own identification with their chosen future work (Gherardi and Nicoloni 2002). Engström (2001) described WPL as an opportunity for students to be exposed to multi-voicedness in the workplace. WPL can contribute not only to student confidence, but also to develop academic, personal, social, cultural and professional capacities (Evans and Guile 2012).

All these advances in theorising the socio-cultural and pedagogical purposes of WPL, such as learning from practice and questioning practice, are increasingly overshadowed by the economic imperative that demands that universities produce employable graduates. As a case in point, there are more and more calls for universities to better understand employment conditions and employer perceptions of what an employable graduate is (Cai 2013). The dominant purpose of WPL within university education is to enhance work

readiness and employability. WPL experiences are therefore provided for students to improve their chances of employment and ultimately contribute to a buoyant economy in a knowledge society (Allen and van der Velden 2011; NCIHE 1997; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2010; Skills Australia 2012). This logic has led to WPL being increasingly incorporated into the tail-end of university curricula (Coll and Zegwaard 2011; Cooper et al. 2010; Hager and Holland 2006).

Such an economic transaction approach to WPL hollows out education. A prime focus on employability and retention attenuates the pedagogical potentials of WPL as a broader learning strategy (Ryan et al. 1996). The strong focus world-wide on students' work-readiness and learning outcomes, dictated by regulated competency standards, threatens to reduce the pedagogical possibilities of WPL to individual, fragmented skill proficiency. Embracing the employability discourse, with its focus on economic development, has meant a shift away from education towards employment and outcomes through the need for universities to take a range of stakeholders' expectations into consideration (such as employers, accreditation bodies, governments and students) (Boud 2012). Implications of the employability discourse can be seen, for example, in the way in which graduate education is reconceptualised as professional education often accredited by professional bodies, and in the shift of responsibility for certain nations' employment concern away from the government onto higher education institutions, including universities (McEwen and Trede in press).

Student attrition in the first year is a complex phenomenon. One reason for this complexity is that widening the participation in university education to people from under-represented groups increases student diversity in terms of age range, family and caring commitments, language background, range of academic skills and prior work experiences. Causes for first year student attrition have been identified to include personal factors such as self-efficacy, autonomous learning and social integration (see Brooman and Darwent 2013 for a quantitative analysis of these factors) as well as, increasingly, institutional and social factors, for example, peer and faculty climates (see, e.g. Oseguera and Rhee 2009). Longitudinal studies confirmed that most movement out of a university course occurs within the first year of study (McMillan 2005: p. 18). A national report on the first year experience in Australia found that first year university students spend long hours in paid work, attend lectures less and rely on lecture notes and favour flexible and online learning courses (James et al. 2010). Another reason for this complexity is that as Carpentieri (2007: 20) asserted "Learners may be 'dipping out' for a while, generally because of other responsibilities". However, dropping out does not necessarily mean not dropping back in again. As Crowther et al. (2010) cautioned students who are dropping out should not be seen as being inconsistent because it does not necessarily mean being non-persistent. The first year experience report further stated that students of low socio-economic status (SES) and first generation in family backgrounds are "focused on training for a particular job ... [and] know the type of occupation they want" (James et al. 2010, p 19). The authors also highlighted that retention issues for students from low SES or first generation groups were more likely to be linked to finding an appropriate match between career choice and course relevance.

Discourses about student attrition rates are often linked to the student experience discourse. The student experience discourse has a strong focus on academic skills emphasising analytical thinking, literacy and numeracy, with a particular focus on the first year. Universities invest in student learning support services in order to improve students' experiences and increase retention rates (Kift 2009; Willcoxson et al. 2011), which presents an interesting mix between entrepreneurial and educational interests. Krause (2011)

constructed the student experience in the first year as a complex phenomenon including students' personal and work backgrounds and university environments. She asserted that the first year curriculum should be "purposefully designed and framed by quality practices and standards" (Krause 2011: 210). This is consistent with the wider literature on student retention that emphasises the way in which authentic curriculums and student-centred learning can improve student engagement and retention (Crosling et al. 2009). In their study on enhanced transition Nelson et al. (2006) advocated for a 'transition philosophy of engagement' and curriculum that is sensitive to the particular challenges of transition learning and inducts students into a community of learners. Similarly, Kift (2009) developed a first year transition pedagogy and recommended a proactive student support service to assist students with academic skills and an enhanced campus experience to help students develop a sense of belonging to the university. WPL, however, was not addressed as a way of addressing these challenges.

Considering the absence of WPL in the first year experience and student retention discourses, we were interested in examining the pedagogical potential of WPL early in the course. Furthermore, a review of the literature highlighted that, despite its potential in addressing the core objectives of engagement and belonging, the role of early WPL experiences in retaining students, enhancing their university experience and strengthening their commitment to a course has been overlooked (Leduq et al. 2012). Empirical studies into the role of the first placements as a retention strategy are rare (Leduq et al. 2012). In addition to this, little is known about the impact of WPL on student retention rates, their commitment in persisting with learning and their career clarification. With this paper, we present empirical data from a pilot study about students' interpretations of their early placement experiences and their impact on their commitment to their studies. We explore these early placement experiences and their impact on keeping students enrolled and persisting with learning. We also discuss the implications and pedagogical potential of early WPL experiences. We argue that WPL in university education can be used as a strategy to assist students to transition into university and develop more deliberate learner and professional identities. When skilfully and purposefully facilitated, WPL experiences have pedagogical possibilities for questioning practice, disrupting academic thinking, instilling curiosity in how to learn and practise, connecting academic, organisational and professional knowledge and imagining other possibilities for knowledge and practice (McEwen and Trede 2014). We conclude that there are benefits for students' learning in using WPL when explicitly embedded in practice-based principles and pedagogy. These principles include preparation and guidance, participation and responsible engagement with critical meaning making of WPL experiences through collective reflection.

## The study

To investigate the role of WPL as part of students' first year of university studies, we sought to capture students' experiences and perceptions about the impact work placements had on developing a commitment to their chosen course, to persisting with learning and the kinds of changes in learning approaches that occurred. The research question that guided our research approach was: 'What is the role of early placement experiences in enhancing the student experience and keeping them enrolled and persisting with learning?' The research design of this pilot study consisted of four phases: identification of WPL subjects in the first year; recruitment of students; data collection; and data analysis.

## Identification of workplace learning subjects in the first year

This study was conducted in a multi-campus, regional university in Australia. The university has a strong focus on practice-based education and professional entry courses. We used the university's definitions and data systems to identify WPL subjects across all courses and faculties. We employed several strategies to identify subjects that offered WPL in the first year. We used the university's subject database to identify subjects that contained WPL experiences. We contacted academics in charge of coordinating WPL subjects from all faculties to assist us identify relevant subjects and their coordinators. Out of 98 bachelor courses only ten offered WPL in the first year. These ten courses represented a recruitment pool of 600 students. After obtaining ethics approval we approached the coordinators of the identified WPL subjects and asked them to invite their students to participate in this study.

## Recruitment and participants

For this study, the researchers adopted a purposive recruitment technique. Initially, they planned to interview participants prior to their first WPL experience, observe during and interview again after their first WPL experience. Because of the low response rate (only two students volunteered and were interviewed) the researchers obtained ethics approval for a variation in research design, which led to an invitation to all students who had completed their first placement to complete a questionnaire. The questionnaire contained 47 items designed to collect data about participants': demographics (including their personal and family's work experience, and educational background); course choice and level of commitment; use of the university's support facilities; and WPL experiences. At the end of the questionnaire students were invited to participate in a follow-up interview to expand on their questionnaire responses. We have reported our findings from the questionnaire elsewhere (McEwen and Trede 2014). In this paper, we focus our discussion on our findings from the follow-up interviews. Ten students volunteered to be interviewed. The interview questions are detailed in "[Appendix](#)". The interviews were semi-structured to enable students to elaborate on their questionnaire responses and to discuss their placement experiences, particularly in relation to commitment to the course, identification with their future work and changes in learning approaches. Due to geographical distances, we conducted interviews over the telephone, which lasted between 20 and 40 min. We recorded and transcribed all interviews.

## Data collection and analysis

Data analysis of the interviews consisted of three phases: description, interpretation and critique. Following Miles and Huberman (1994) qualitative data analysis, we described students' experiences through prolonged transcript immersion in phase 1. In phase 2, we compared our descriptions and developed shared themes. In phase 3, we critiqued our interpretations searching for contrasts in placements experiences and contradictions in perceptions. We also compared our findings with the literature. Due to the chosen research design, our aim was not to make general statements about the first placement experiences and student retention, but to explore its potential roles and make recommendations for further research to better integrate WPL early in the curriculum.

## Participants' profile

The ten participants in this study were from diverse backgrounds in terms of demographics, type of course enrolled in and type of WPL model experienced. This range of backgrounds is summarised below in Table 1.

Of the ten participants interviewed, five were from the Faculty of Business, four from the Faculty of Science and one from the Faculty of Arts. Courses included the Bachelor of Business, Accounting, Nursing, Veterinary Science and Theatre/Media Studies. All participants took part in mandatory work placements. In the Faculty of Business students were encouraged to find their own placements and the placement experience was for 1 week. In the Faculty of Science, the veterinary placement lasted 4 weeks and the nursing course offered three placements in the first year, each lasting 2 weeks. The theatre/media course consists of a number of short placements related to theatre productions. In the Faculty of Business, all but one participant were mature aged students with prior work experiences and only one participant was from an underrepresented student group (a first generation university student). In the Faculty of Science, participants were equally divided between nursing and veterinary science. The two participating nursing students were first generation university students and fell under the school leaver category, whereas the two veterinary student participants presented different age groups. Of this latter group, one was first generation university student and the other participant was not and had considerable professional work experience in her field of study.

## Findings

All participants agreed on the strong positive influence WPL had towards staying enrolled. Despite diverse experiences with WPL, all would recommend it to future first year students. For those who had failed academic subjects, the placement experience was a key factor in persuading them to stay enrolled and persist with their learning. In what follows, we discuss our main findings in three sections: reasons for dropping out, reasons for staying enrolled, and exposure to workplace environments.

### Reasons for dropping out

Participants' responses varied in relation to the questions about reasons for dropping out. Some had considered dropping out very often, whereas others had not yet considered it at all.

However when asked what reasons they could think of for dropping out participants identified issues that fell broadly within two categories: academic and personal.

Personal issues included the difficulty in juggling work, family and study commitments as key reasons for dropping out affirming the longitudinal course attrition study by McMillan (2005).

### Reasons for staying on

#### *Impact of placement experience on commitment to staying enrolled*

Not one participant identified the first placement experience as a reason for dropping out, even though they were mandatory. On the contrary, all participants recommended the first placement experience as a retention booster. Participants reported that WPL mitigated

**Table 1** Demographics of participants, WPL model and type of students

Name <sup>a</sup>	Course	WPL model	Student demographics
Candice	Bachelor of Theatre/Media studies Internal	Had not experienced WPL at time of interview	Not from underrepresented student group 18–24 years old
Adam	Bachelor of Nursing Internal	Had not experienced WPL at time of interview	First generation uni student 18–24 years old
Ursula	Bachelor of Nursing Internal	Three placements	First generation uni student 18–24 years old
Tony	Veterinary Science Internal	4 days in private practice	Not from underrepresented student group Mature-aged student with experience in the field of study 30–39 years old
Patricia	Veterinary Science Internal	4 weeks	First generation uni student 18–24 years old
Ophelia	Bachelor of Business	Placement on university campus 35 h	Not from underrepresented student group Mature aged students 40–59 years old
John	Bachelor of Business/Management DE Part-time	Placement at current workplace 35 h	Not from underrepresented student group Mature aged students (30–39 years old)
Larry	Bachelor of Business	Placement in international firm 35 h	Not from underrepresented student group 18–24 years old
Marina	Bachelor of Accounting DE	Placement at current workplace (in family business)	Not from underrepresented student group Over 40 years old
Nadia	Bachelor of Business Management DE	Placement at current workplace 35 h	First generation university students 30–39 years old

<sup>a</sup> All names are pseudonyms

thoughts of dropping out caused by poor academic performance; however, WPL could not stop students from dropping out due to personal reasons. The placement experience was perceived as a strategy to help stay committed to the course, especially for participants who confessed to struggling academically. Participants felt that learning in the workplace was more engaging and relevant than learning in the classroom. Through the practical work on placement, the connection between theory and its application was made obvious to them. Ursula who had failed two academic subjects felt her confidence was boosted because “practising lots of clinical skills was absolutely fantastic”. She learnt best by doing and interacting with others. She succinctly described her perceived placement benefits as follows: “I gained a lot more skills and I actually had one nurse there who told me basically all she knew”. For Patricia who felt stressed by academic work, WPL was welcomed as a way of persisting with her academic education. As illustrated in the following statement, she found that WPL helped her make sense of academic learning and was a reminder of how to achieve her professional goal:

It [WPL] was actually quite enjoyable because it put things back into perspective. Like, where we wanted to be and our goals sort of thing, which was really good in terms of giving me motivation again to study the other subjects (Patricia).

#### *Impact of first placement for school leavers with no prior experience in the field*

The value of WPL experiences for participants in the Faculty of Business was mainly in relation to career commitment and vocational goals. For example, Larry felt that the 1 week experience in a ‘real’ business gave him first hand exposure to the “corporate environment including learning to wear a suit and for the first time having an office to myself which was cool”. He also received his first work reference, which was the beginning of building his professional portfolio. Patricia described the value of the first placement in the following terms: “You get an insight into how it all works together”. Seeing the bigger picture of what is involved and what it takes to become a professional can be of particular value to first year students.

#### *Impact of early placements on learning and outlook on future practice and career*

Trish who already had work experience in her chosen field of study felt that WPL helped her contextualise her practice. She learnt that practice had to be tailored to each situation, as she explained: “In reality sometimes the best practice isn’t the practice, for whatever reason. ... It’s not essential to do best practice”. She also felt that her interactions with her placement supervisors could not be replaced through classroom teaching. “In the placement you can ask more about the reasoning in detail which you cannot do in the classroom. Getting that real world practitioner opinion on some of those things is quite valuable I think.” Patricia saw the first placement as a motivator and effective strategy for becoming an engaged learner and start integrating foundational theoretical principles into practice realities:

Well, to be honest, before I went on my first placement, I was just sort of going through the motions, just because it was something that had to be done. When we got a taste of the placements, we could realise it’s not just going through the motions; it’s actively involving yourself. Well, I think the biggest thing is that the work placements are probably the best part of our first year, because it does give you that motivation that you need, because this first year, a lot of the basics are biology and



chemistry and that can get tedious and when it's not quite so applied it gets quite boring at times. So I think the motivation was very well needed (Patricia).

Nadia assumed that WPL was all geared towards boosting employability and she surprised herself that the experience propelled her beyond this:

On initially reading the subject outline, I was like it's all to do with employability skills and looking at your future career goals, but I think I got more out of it personally on how I see that evolving - looking at placement a bit differently. It gets you thinking about all the other possibilities of where to take the degree when I'm finished (Nadia).

### Exposure to workplace environments

Participants reported varied experiences within the workplace environment. Their interpretation and experiences relied heavily on their background as well as the workplace culture within which they were placed. For Larry, a school leaver, the placement was a first experience with the world of work: "It exposed me to the corporate environment including learning to wear a suit and for the first time having an office to myself which was cool."

Negative experiences reported by participants related to not fitting into the operations of the workplace, not being able to or not being encouraged to contribute to services, which often led to a sense of being perceived as a burden. Larry felt that towards the end of his week-long placement staff ran out of things for him to do. There was no consideration given to the role of learning from observation.

Participants defined supportive workplace environments in relation to the student-placement supervisor relationship. Ursula experienced a supervisor who greatly contributed to her learning to become a nurse. This was made the more poignant when she had to deal with others who did not. Being exposed to this diversity of supervisors (and colleagues) introduced participants to the reality of workplace environments. Participants who reported poor experiences felt they could not ask questions because their supervisors were too busy or, worse, ignored them. One female participant experienced sexist behaviour from older male practitioners towards her. Some reported that they felt treated like school children rather than future colleagues. Despite these negative experiences participants would still recommend placements without hesitation. They felt these experiences introduced them to practice realities. However, workplace environments also provided avenues for learning about how to fit into the taken-for granted practice culture rather than as an opportunity to consider how things could be otherwise. For example, Patricia learnt to accept the status quo: "a couple of students in my discussion group did say how you've just got to take it with a grain of salt and not take it to heart. You just have to think, that's just the way they are and just deal with it, sort of thing".

Participants struggled to articulate their expectations of WPL and few reported self-initiated preparation for their placement. Most participants seemed to follow university requirements diligently and only few went beyond. The ones who demonstrated self-initiative accepted the responsibility to make the placement suitable and effective for their learning and professional needs. Participants who crafted their activities on placement with their supervisors and who negotiated their learning and practice goals with their supervisors enriched their professional portfolio and exited the placement with clearer career goals.

## Workplace learning's purposes

This pilot study indicates that early placement experiences have a positive impact on retention even when these experiences are negative. None of our participants considered dropping out due to mandatory placements. The hypothesis of using WPL as a retention strategy in the first year has been supported by this study. Students with no prior experience in their chosen field of study found the early exposure to the workplace, its culture and norms invaluable in affirming their course and career choice, whereas students who already had experience in their chosen field of study used early placement experiences to explore future career options. Despite these promising findings there are many other possibilities for WPL and its pedagogical intent that have not been fully exploited.

As discussed earlier, the dominant purpose of WPL is to provide structured activities in 'authentic' work situations where students can apply and be assessed for the competencies in knowing what for, what to do, and how to perform in their future field of practice (Billett 2009). It can also be used to provide students with "opportunities to trial and experience occupations" (Billett 2009: 836) in order to define their match with the given occupation. Yet, the pedagogical intent of WPL can have an altogether different purpose: to enable students to question the practices they observe on placement and use placement experiences to trigger reflection and search for new knowledge and deeply understand theoretical relevance (Schön 1983). Early WPL experiences can set the scene for students to question practice, theorise from practice and imagine other work related possibilities.

Learning from scrutinising experiences enables students to identify problems, such as uncertainty and complexity of professional practice, to instil an enduring curiosity to question why things are done the way they are and develop lifelong learning skills (Kemmis 2012). Early WPL can be a major opportunity for students who are new to a professional field of practice to reflect on ways of doing, saying and relating because they are not yet socialised into the profession or the community of practice. They can see practices with 'naive' eyes. Placement experiences offer students a break from academic abstract teaching by focusing on the situatedness (e.g. in time and place) and socio-cultural nature of professional practice (e.g. hierarchies and language diversity). Without intending to oversimplify or to establish an artificial binary, but rather to bridge the gap between two extreme worlds of university and work, WPL in university education can be seen as having great potential in helping students negotiate the transition between these two worlds as shown in Table 2. The middle column, titled WPL, highlights the use of pedagogies that enable wider learning not only of the doing, but also ways of knowing, saying and relating, as discussed by Kemmis (2012) and Higgs (2012). WPL has the potential to allow WPL stakeholders (students, university and industry partners) to traverse boundaries and strengthen the university-industry nexus rather than divide it.

The practical aspects of WPL and the focus on practice require a different set of abilities to academic learning skills. WPL requires students to develop their socio-cultural, discursive and relational abilities such as communication skills, team work, and initiative taking abilities as well as responding to practice situations quickly. This also means developing an inquiry-based approach to learning and work, which places WPL at the centre of the curriculum. Although there is a strong focus on WPL as a strategy to enhance graduate employability and as transition pedagogy from study to employment, within this paper, we have discussed ways in which early WPL can be used as a transition pedagogy into university education. Introducing WPL in the first year complements academic skills early, and allows students to develop broader generic skills, which together with academic skills, nurture a well rounded future professional.

**Table 2** WPL as a transition pedagogy between university and work

World of university	WPL	World of work
Being taught and learning about theory and abstract concepts	Observing practice Comparing practice with theory Putting theory and abstract concepts into practice Theorising about practice Reflecting on and questioning ways of doing, saying and relating	Applying professional know-how and concrete performance
Formal learning arrangements prime	Drawing on both formal and informal learning opportunities	Informal learning arrangements prime
Learning through rote, repetition, simulation, assessments	Learning through observation, practice and from safely making errors	Learning through practice and one off training
Professional practice is mostly seen out of context	Professional practice is shaped by placement contexts and can be compared with other students and more global contexts	Professional practice is in context

### Pedagogical implications

A strong focus on employability in WPL placement experiences runs the risk of overly vocationalising university courses and being confronted with the question *where is the 'higher' education?* in a course that only seeks to match employers' expectations or stated needs. Developing work-ready graduates is one mission, but cultivating critical thinking, awareness of sustainability, social responsibility and global citizenship is another that has enjoyed a strong tradition in universities and should not be discarded (McEwen and Trede in press). The benefits of WPL can easily be narrowed to employability. WPL can be a pedagogy of the 'same', or of reproduction of current practices (Lingard 2007), but it can also be a pedagogy of difference, or of deliberateness for future practices (Trede and McEwen 2013). A pedagogy of deliberateness would prepare students before placements for uncertainty and rapid change as well as for diversity of cultural, economic, political and material workplace environments; it would encourage students during placements to develop strategic questioning skills and deliberately position themselves appropriately in the workplace; and after placements it would create communicative spaces to critically reflect on WPL experiences and identify strategies to improve their next placement experiences and emergent professional practices.

Exposure to WPL early in the course has been avoided for several reasons. One reason is that students are seen as not having sufficient discipline specific knowledge and skills to contribute and participate meaningfully in a placement. Another reason is that students might not be safe enough to contribute to work. Both of these reasons make them more susceptible to be relegated to menial tasks. Yet another reason is that placements are scarce. These reasons mean that first year students are more likely to be seen as a burden by placement hosts. However, the value of early placement experiences from a pedagogical perspective is to instil curiosity and a desire to understand why things are the way they are, to understand professional practice as a socio-cultural and interprofessional practice, beyond technical and discipline-specific domains, and to observe the workplace environment with 'naive' eyes to imagine other possibilities for their future. Students can observe non-verbal communications and professional relationships, gain impressions of the

workplace cultures and WPL environments. It is important to prepare students for what they might be exposed to in the real world of work early so that they can then collectively reflect on what they have observed afterwards (Grace and Trede 2011). Because more and more workplaces are adopting a rhetoric of flexibility that expect employees' stated need "to accept constant change as a given, forgo any expectation of stable employment and organizational loyalty, and assume personal responsibility for adapting to organizations' changing needs for skills and labor" (Fenwick 2001: p. 3), it is essential to enable students to reflect and make meaning of their experiences in the classroom and in the workplace, but also to enable them to identify strategies to deal with similar future situations. There are many pedagogical possibilities in WPL and they can be optimally realised through an explicitly deliberate pedagogy.

## Conclusion

From our study, we conclude that early WPL experiences in university courses can motivate students to persist with learning and stay enrolled. Furthermore, WPL can clarify course and career choices for students. The curricular significance of early placement experiences include a richer pedagogical repertoire and more balanced approach between academic learning and hands on practice, early exposure to ethical, cultural and political issues in professional practice and a stronger focus on practice- and inquiry-based education that nurtures deliberate, life-long learners.

As a pilot study, our findings have also highlighted the need for future research to focus on student diversity and what type of placements suits individual students best. Some student have prior work experience in their chosen field of study, other students are new to the field of study and are unfamiliar with the work environment and cultures that typifies their chosen future work. Students with family commitments, impairments and or with research career paths, require special attention in terms of placements.

Further, comparative studies might be needed to highlight the role of preparation prior to placements or the role of debriefing and collective reflection sessions after placement experience in relation to students' learning experiences and commitment to their course and chosen career path. Further research could explore the role of early WPL as stages of transition not only from work or school to university studies.

Discipline specific research can provide more profession-specific knowledge and pedagogical strategies for the first year curriculum. Investigations into appropriate structures of placements in terms of length and what breadth and support they should offer is important to make the experience beneficial to all involved.

## Appendix: Follow up survey questions

1. Tell me a bit about your placement?
2. Has your answer to question 'What are some of the reasons why you might drop out or might have dropped out of this course' changed?
3. Can you tell me a bit more about/expand on your answer about how you prepared for the work experience placement?.

4. Can you tell me a bit more about/expand on your answer about how you appraised your work experience placement? What did you gain from this? Did you follow up with any other activities?
5. What are some of the insights you have gained from your appraisal?
6. Has this experience changed the way you learn?(what and how)
7. How does this experience compare with your expectations or what you were looking for?
8. What might an ideal WPL placement be like?
9. Has WPL helped you understand what your profession is about? How?
10. Has this placement helped you become clearer about what kind of a professional you want to be/become?
11. How would you approach your next placement?
12. What would you tell a first year student about placements?
13. Is there anything else you want to say? (that might have motivated you to agree to this interview)

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