

# **Negotiating a VET teacher education practicum in rural and isolated areas.**

*Peter Ellicott*  
*Charles Sturt University*

## **Abstract**

Students enrolled in VET teacher education courses at universities are sometimes required to undertake practicums as part of their study program. Practicums are a vital component in many educational courses at all levels, and their role is explored through relevant literature, particularly in the VET area. Most students contact their local TAFE, community college or one of a number of Registered Training Organisations to organise a practicum placement and they face the challenge of negotiating suitable times and relevant classes to work with. Rural and isolated students face additional challenges. In isolated areas there may be no TAFE facilities, or they operate on a part time basis, with very limited courses. There may be no community college presence and no other Registered Training Organisations. This paper explores the options open to students and attempts to identify ways in which universities can assist them to secure and undertake their practicums. This issue was researched at Charles Sturt University (CSU) through three different methods and data obtained as part of the 2005 review of VET courses.

## **Introduction**

Practicums are an essential part of many professional courses at universities. They are included in many disciplines and provide the student with the opportunity to put the theory they have learned into practice. Practicums also provide students with real life experiences and allow them to prepare themselves for employment in their chosen field. The role of practicums also spreads across all educational sectors.

In looking at practicums, the terms work experience, work placement, field experience, industry placement and practicum placement have often been used in much the same context. These were identified by Smith and Harris (2000) and are used by different sectors. The problem for some students in rural and isolated areas is the ability to locate a suitable practicum placement or the prospect of being required to travel long distances to larger centres. Universities accept such students into their courses and need to look at options to assist them in securing suitable practicum placements. This paper will highlight the importance of practicum placements in the context of teacher training for the vocational education and training (VET) sector, and will endeavour to identify ways that Universities can address this issue.

## Literature review

The literature explores a number of ways in which practicum placements are viewed and delivered in VET educational programs in both at the secondary and tertiary level. Smith and Harris (2000) point out that much of the literature in relation to practicums is in the university sector, with some from the school sector and little from the VET sector.

They cite Thomson (1996 p.4) in Smith and Harris (2000 p 21) agreeing that work placements provide an opportunity for students to practice and hone skills which have been taught in their studies, to learn new skills which may not have been covered and 'to understand real world application of skills.' Smith and Harris suggested a list of benefits of work placements for all stakeholders including students, employers, VET providers and teachers, which are;

‘For students

- learning new skills and applying existing ones
- learning how to behave at work
- experiencing a variety of workplaces
- a chance to practise on modern or different equipment
- learning from other students' experience
- becoming empowered by success and wider knowledge
- increase in skills and in finding a job

For employers

- an extra pair of hands
- Staff development opportunity for supervisors and mentors
- a chance to try out potential employees
- philanthropic and advertising function
- finding out about other available courses from the educational provider
- an increase in the skills pool in local and national labour market
- better understanding of the national VET system

For VET providers and teachers

- learning about new developments in workplaces
- networking
- chance to enrol employees or sell consultancy services
- potential for involving employers in other activities, for example, employer groups
- increased repertoire of workplace anecdotes for classroom teaching.’ Smith and Harris (2000 p.22-23).

Misko (2000) in writing about placements in the school sector found that most students who completed them found them fulfilling and enjoyable. But Misko stated that objectives of a work placement needed to be 'very well defined and clearly written and

feasible'. Misko and Slack (2001) looked at the advantages of students combining practical training in industry with classroom based learning. While these papers are centred on the school sector, they highlight similar opportunities and benefits to those suggested by Smith and Harris. Cullen (2005) discussed the benefits derived from cooperative education programs between educational institutions and organisations for environmental students studying at the Southern Cross University and listed a number of benefits for all parties. He said that practicums also provide a useful platform for other areas of co operation between universities and the industry sector.

Martin and Leberman (2005) looked at the benefits for sports management students in courses at Massey University NZ where they are required to do 180 hours on a specific program in a sporting organisation. The students apply their theoretical knowledge to the 'real world'. They cited Parkhouse (2001), Macaulay (2000) and Reynolds (1998) in Martin and Leberman (2005 p19) who concurred that the practical experience helps the students in the development of their learning. These findings are also supported by Orrell, Cooper and Jones (1999) researching from the perspective of practicum coordinators in work experience placements and stated that they provide an opportunity to make students 'work ready' upon graduation.

In summary, the literature identifies the benefits of practicum placements for all participants concerned, but very little attention is paid to the problem faced by rural and isolated students in securing suitable practicum placements.

### **Vocational Education and Training (VET) Courses at Charles Sturt University (CSU).**

Charles Sturt University offers VET courses at the associate degree, bachelor and graduate diploma levels. There are 309 students enrolled in these courses. All students study by distance education and therefore are not required to attend the University during their studies. They are required to complete two practicum subjects during their studies EPT103 Teaching and Training Practices1 and EPT203 Teaching and Training Practices 2. These subjects require the student to undertake a practicum placement in a TAFE college or other Registered Training Organisation. The practicum subjects each consist of 100 hours of teaching/training experience in a vocational education or training setting and are designed to develop the student's competencies as professional teachers and trainers. The practicum subjects cover the requirements for the Certificate 1V in Assessment and Workplace Training. Students enrolled in the VET courses at CSU negotiate their own practicum placements, requiring the student to approach a suitable training provider in their discipline area. Whilst it is the students' own responsibility, assistance and advice is provided by the subject coordinator for their respective practicum subject, as well as from practicum handbooks which are supplied as part of the course materials.

### **Research methods**

Four methods of research were used to try and identify what problems students had in securing suitable practicum placements. These methods were easily available and formed

part of an overall evaluation of the subjects and the course.

1. A questionnaire sent to all students (99) undertaking two practicum subjects in the VET courses at CSU at the end of the spring semester (July to November) of 2005, as part of the evaluation of these subjects. These were emailed to students so that they could be filled out electronically and returned in the same manner. The questionnaire was comprised of a number of questions which asked the students to;

- identify if they resided in a capital city, regional centre or isolated location,
- their course of study,
- the subject they were currently studying,
- whether they were a teacher/ trainer at the time they undertook the practicum subject,
- the steps taken to secure the practicum placement,
- the difficulties the students had in securing a practicum placement,
- advice, if any, they sought from the University, and
- advice, if any, they thought the University should provide to students.

There were 22 completed questionnaires which provided a response rate of 21.78%. Over the semester a number of students from rural areas who were not employed as teachers /trainers, sought assistance in attempting to secure a suitable practicum placement and this was the motivation for sending the questionnaire. There was an expectation that these students would respond in greater numbers, with feedback on the ways in which the University could assist them, but this did not happen.

2. Interviews were conducted with three lecturers who have taught a number of practicum subjects over the past ten years. In the interviews they were asked to reflect on the problems regional and rural students faced in organising and completing their practicum subjects.

3. A review of the enrolment retention figures for the first practicum subject in the spring semester (July to November) of 2005 at CSU was undertaken where there were 33 students enrolled. Two students from rural areas who withdrew from the practicum subject were spoken to in relation to their reasons for not continuing.

4. A review of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) courses at Charles Sturt University (CSU) was undertaken in 2005. This review coincided with the requirements of the new Training Package in Training and Assessment (TAA40104) which was released in November 2004, as well as rapid changes in the VET sector. The review was undertaken to reflect the changes that had occurred over the past five years which required students to acquire new skills and knowledge. The reasons for the changes are listed in the CSU Faculty of Education course review document 2005; some of which were, the abolition of Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), the ageing VET workforce, the need to review the course materials, the growth of nationally accredited courses and the need for more practitioners to broaden their skills and functions within

the VET sector. The following comments were taken from the section on student qualitative responses to the VET course review, where students were asked to nominate two subjects that were most useful and least useful to them, giving reasons for their responses.

## **Findings**

### *Responses to questionnaire*

72.8% of the students stated that they were from a regional city, small town or remote area of less than 10,000 people. 61.9% stated that they were teachers/trainers at the time of their practicum placement. This probably had an impact on the low number of students who had problems securing practicum placements, as the students who were already teacher/trainers would not experience the same difficulties as those who were not teachers/trainers. 19% (4) of the students had difficulties in securing their practicum placement. Of those 4, 3 students were from a regional city or rural town and one was from a capital city. While this is not a substantial figure it does highlight the problems that are faced by this cohort of students. Some of the comments made by the students in response to the question about advice the university could provide included, more information and earlier advice about the requirements of the practicums and that the university make contact with organisations to help the students in securing a suitable practicum placement. One student also suggested that someone from the VET staff should visit the practicum sites to observe the students.

### *Responses from interviews*

The following is a summary of their responses from the lecturers who were interviewed in relation to the practicum subjects they had taught. There was a distinct limitation of placements in a number of discipline areas and often TAFE courses are not conducted unless sufficient students are enrolled. There was also a limited amount of sites in which students could undertake their practicum experience. Comment was also made that this situation should have improved with the increase in the number of RTOs, which now stands at over 4000. The lecturers said that private providers are sometimes more secretive about their activities and therefore may not be open to accepting a student in their organisation. Some staff at the small TAFE colleges may be guarded about accepting a student in the fear that it may be competition for employment in a very limited job market. Students may also have to travel long distances to larger centres to complete their practicums and this may present problems. Students may need to extend their practicums over much longer periods, due to the limited hours that are offered at some of the smaller rural campuses.

### *Review of enrolment figures*

In the review of the enrolment figures of the first practicum subject only 19 students completed the subject. Of the 14 that withdrew, there were 12 from regional / rural areas. A number of these students sought assistance with their practicum placement, but later withdrew from the subject. Two of the students who were spoken as a result of the research, advised that they had contacted their local TAFE, however were told that the

TAFE ran limited programs and that their interest area could not be catered for. One then spoke to the Community college but could not be placed. The other student contacted a larger TAFE in a centre 90 minutes drive from her home to arrange a practicum, but could not organise a placement in her discipline area. This review again highlights the problem faced by this cohort of students, in securing suitable practicum placements.

*Student comments from review of VET courses.*

In the practicum subjects, the students were asked to identify two positive aspects of the completing the practicum subjects. The following are a summary of the responses received;

- 1 Wonderful introduction to teaching for new teachers
- 2 Lots of great ideas and training methods. Shows how to set a lesson plan.
- 3 A highly motivating subject that is early in the course - very practical.
- 4 Really got the practicalities of planning and delivering training.
- 5 Forced me to develop templates that could be used on the job.
- 6 Assisted in broadening my practices and have a deeper understanding of teaching and learning.
- 7 Gave me practical skills necessary to teach more effectively.
- 8 Provided me with the skills and knowledge needed for teaching and training.
- 9 Helped to link the theory and practical aspects of teaching and training.
- 10 Helped me understand the different methods of teaching and the many different learning needs of students.
- 11 Relevant to my employment.
- 12 This and its predecessor last semester provided excellent opportunities to look hard at one's own shortfalls and where to focus attention so as to become a better teacher.
- 13 Reassured me that I am a good teacher
- 14 Helped link the theory and practical aspects of teaching and training.

These comments reinforced the importance that the practicum subjects have from the students' perspective, which was considered a very important process in the review of the VET courses. Students enrolled in the VET courses at CSU negotiate their own practicum placements, requiring the student to approach a suitable training provider in their discipline area. Whilst it is the students' own responsibility, assistance and advice is provided by the subject coordinator for their respective practicum subject, as well as from practicum handbooks which are supplied as part of the course materials.

### **Discussion and recommendations**

The review of the VET courses and the literature discussed in this paper support the importance of the practicum in educational courses. This is discussed by Misko and Slack (2001) and Martin and Leberman (2005) in looking at the benefits that students gained in applying theory to a work placement or practicum. Smith and Harris (2000) also

supported the role work placements and listed a number of benefits for all the stakeholders. Cullen (2005) took a similar approach and then looked at the benefits of cooperation between Universities and the industry sector. But the research also highlighted the fact that a number of students experience a range of problems in securing a suitable practicum placement, especially those who are located in rural and isolated areas. There appears to be less choice in the number of sites that a student can approach in relation to their practicum and there is also the issue of the part time nature of many of the organisations in rural areas. Students may have to travel extensive distances to undertake their practicums or have to take their practicums over an extended period, which may be outside the normal semester periods under which Universities operate.

There is a clearly identified need to assist these students during their pursuit of a suitable practicum placement. There are a number of ways in which Universities can respond.

- Detailed information about the practicum requirements should be available when students first enrol in the VET programs. CSU has introduced a two day orientation residential school for new students studying in the VET courses, which includes sessions on the practicum requirements. In 2007 it is anticipated that an orientation CD will be produced for all new students in the VET courses, covering the same materials that are in the orientation program.
- Students should be given a list of potential practicum placements that they can contact.
- A letter of introduction should be sent to students for prospective placements which outlines the requirements of the practicum, including contact numbers for the subject coordinator at the University.
- Subject coordinators should provide ongoing support to assist the students in securing a practicum placement and that a degree of flexibility within the University rules, be given to ensure that students have every opportunity to complete the practicum.
- Students undertaking the VET programs who are required to travel to complete a practicum or who have to relocate to complete a practicum, be encouraged to apply for Equity Scholarships that are now available at most Universities.
- Universities should invest in forging positive partnerships with training providers in regional areas to allow for easier access for student practicums.
- The use of technology through on line learning and simulated teaching and training exercises may be utilised to assist students with parts of their practicum requirements, reducing the need to undertake the full hours of practicum experience in a workplace.
- The introduction of more flexible or extended time periods for students to complete their practicum placement.
- Universities may need to seek the cooperation of graduates as advocates to assist current students as mentors, or as a pool for potential practicum placements.

## **Conclusion**

The importance of a practicum placement has been supported in the literature and by student comment in this paper and the research findings have helped to identify the problems that continue to exist for VET students from rural and isolated areas, who are

not employed as teachers/trainers, in securing suitable practicum placements.

Universities need to continue to explore more flexible and innovative ways of addressing this issue and to continually evaluate the practicum subjects, with feedback from students, RTOs and other providers of placements for students. There is also a need for universities to continue to develop partnerships with organisations both in metropolitan and rural areas, in a whole range of areas and particularly for students requiring suitable practicum placements.

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