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Don't Throw the Baby out with the Bathwater: Work Placements for Student Learning

It was reported this week that the Fair Work Ombudsman was to launch an inquiry into unpaid internships to determine the place of such arrangements within employment law. Certainly the reported stories told by students who have been exploited are indicative of a need to shore up the framework within which such work occurs.

In a passionate blog post, boeufblogginon wrote about the imperative to stop the exploitation in this field. She pointed to the compulsory nature of such work experience for university qualification, and that:

For universities it has become a way of saving money. By including internships as a core "subject", the university doesn't have to pay for face to face teaching, but the internship will still generate income from these student hours for the tertiary institution concerned.

I have no quarrel with the importance of ensuring that students are not exploited, and ensuring that such internships take place in a way so as to protect students. I do not dispute that many have experienced the kinds of dreadful conditions reported in the media, and by boeufblogginon.

What I seek to do in this post is to highlight the genuine opportunities for work integrated learning that exist for students in universities around Australia. In investigating abuses of the system, in my view it is important not to throw the baby out with the bathwater so to speak, and to ensure that we can continue to provide the opportunity for students to have supervised (and safe) learning opportunities in the workplace.

What is Work Integrated Learning ('WIL')?

I've used the definition of WIL from the Innovative Research Universities brochure. (My own university is a member of this group.)

WIL stands for work integrated learning, an umbrella term used to describe a range of approaches that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum. The most common form of WIL involves a student placement or project within a workplace. Universities, students and employers work together to design and create a learning experience that benefits all parties. The student's progress and learning outcomes are monitored and assessed by the university, with input from the employer.

Crucially in this definition are the terms 'purposefully designed curriculum' and the 'benefit (to) all parties'. While the implication in boeufblogginon's post is that there is no educational input from the university, a WIL subject that incorporates work placement requires intensive educational input and is a deliberately designed and assessed program. While in such programs there is no payment to the student, the credit points attaching to the subject will (in my experience) reflect the expected number of hours per week spent on that subject. This would include time spent in the workplace as well as assessment tasks. The placements are therefore not 9-5 daily.

Additionally, it is my understanding that for a subject to satisfy the HECS requirements, it *must* be educational and therefore supervised. The university cannot claim as a subject an activity that has no educational validity and no university input or supervision. That is not to say that there are institutions that fail this requirement. However part of an inquiry into internships may need to canvass the ways in which universities are accountable for the educational design of such placements.

Is WIL exploitation?

ABOUT ME





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I lecture in land law at James Cook University and I write and think about the nature of property and its representations in the law; about issues affecting women; about justice generally; and about legal education.

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It is possible to see WIL as a form of cheap (free) labour or exploitation in terms of financial reward, or as boeufblogginon pointed out, in terms of some kind of barter. On the other hand, if it is seen as an educational opportunity (ie to advance student learning) then the perspective shifts.

In terms of the personal experiences of students that have been reported in the media, and as cited by boeufblogginon, there appears to be little if any educational component and these would naturally tend to support a claim of exploitation. The power imbalance alone is sufficient to warrant such a claim.

All I seek to do here is to differentiate a genuine educational opportunity (WIL) from these other experiences.

How is it educational?

There are a number of different types of WIL. Examples are provided on the IRU website. The one kind of WIL that I have observed (though not supervised) is a law work placement subject. The coordinator identifies work places and gauges interest. They provide a comprehensive information package to the employer about expectations and how the program works, and interviews each supervisor.

Students enrolled are first required to reflect upon what they would like to learn from their placement based on what they don't really know about the law or about practice. Students formally apply to the workplace and are interviewed. Students negotiate their own outcomes with the employer, and these are discussed with the coordinator. The outcomes in the workplace will align with what the student seeks to learn. The student is required to reflect periodically on their placement, identifying what they are learning as they go, interacting with fellow students and the coordinator. They receive feedback from the coordinator along the way. Reflection is identified as a key generic skill in the contemporary university graduate.

At the end of the placement, the students present a portfolio representing their learning and experience in the context of their work (naturally not breaching confidentiality). The employer also provides a report confirming compliance with the placement requirements (though this is not assessed).

Feedback from students is overwhelmingly positive. Likewise, my colleagues in the profession who have supervised students are keen to continue. While not all students secure paid employment from the experience, some have.

Appropriate boundaries

Subjects such as the one I have described, or other WIL programs elsewhere, should be open to scrutiny. Because they are part of an educational qualification, such programs must be educational and be designed to promote student learning within the discipline.

There is no room for the kinds of exploitative internships quoted in the media, and particularly not in the context of higher education. However in ensuring proper protection for students undertaking internships, thought needs to be given also to legitimate workplace participation for student learning. Hopefully the inquiry will clarify for educators, students and employers just how we can appropriately provide such opportunities.

Posted by Kate Galloway at 14:01

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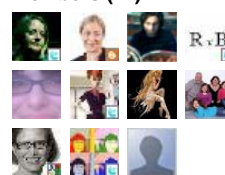
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