

# Strong support for library practicum

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My curiosity was sparked by a recent query regarding the impact on our profession of supporting tertiary students with library based work placements. Although the library services I was familiar with made strong commitments to these placements, even in times of tough cuts to staffing levels, I could not recall ever having discussed work placements with other colleagues.

To fill the information gap I canvassed the issue informally with other library managers in Far North Queensland. Given the number of recent appointments to the region this discussion includes experiences from South Australian and Victorian public libraries.

The resulting comments are summarised below in no particular order:

- There was a unanimous response that the library sector is highly committed to supporting the work placement programs. More than one response indicated this was ranked higher than supporting secondary student work experience programs.

One explanation for this commitment is the expectation of achieving higher returns to the library itself from hosting tertiary students from library and information disciplines.

- Work placements tended to fall into one of the following types. Firstly there were those students placed for a block of time usually of two to four weeks duration on a full-time basis. Secondly there were placements where, after an initial short full-time block the student returns for daily periods over the balance of the semester. The first type tends to reinforce the student consolidating a broader network of staff support within the library, whilst in the latter case the wide distribution of hours can create situations where some students become highly dependent on a small number of people for support.
- Within the libraries some supervisors have developed programs which are structured around a modified version of their standard induction programs thus placing little additional burden

on personnel workloads. It has been observed that it has been beneficial for library staff to be required to succinctly describe the nature of their role as part of this process.

- Hosting student placements has led to openings for employment of some students. The benefit to the library service when undertaking selection processes has been their confidence in the work performance of those applicants who may have attended a work placement in the past.
- Some of the smaller libraries have little contact with student work placements. Often the only exposure is via support for library staff who are undertaking studies whilst working in the field.
- In smaller rural centres it can be difficult for students to obtain work placements with two type of difficulties highlighted. Firstly, those students who are restricted by work commitments to undertake work placements only in their holidays can find it difficult to obtain placements. In this regard particular mention was made of education department staff who must obtain placements in the school holidays and therefore find it difficult to obtain placements in public libraries which can be understaffed and/or very busy with programs during school holidays.

Secondly, it would appear that some students are required to obtain work placements which are outside their normal work environment. In smaller centres this can be very difficult as the range of choices is limited.

- There was a unanimous response that the results of student projects have been useful in the majority of cases whether resulting from a work placement or from the library being a participant in a separate research project. It was generally felt that the return to the library for the resources committed was good and definitively valued more highly than the return from secondary school work experience placements.

Whilst hardly a scientific approach to the topic the results reveal a strong commitment within our profession to supporting student work placements. ■

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The forum will be held on

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