

The value of experience

The concept of combining some level of practical experience with academic learning is widely accepted within a broad range of professional disciplines, including the library and information field. Providing opportunities to undertake placements, field work, internships and study visits enables students to experience first-hand the workplace for which they are preparing themselves.

An important part of this experiential learning is the process of reflecting on what has been seen and experienced. How does it fit with existing knowledge?

Why is it different /the same as is taught in the classroom? As a student, do I need to revisit some of this learning? Is it likely to be the same elsewhere or is there something unique about this particular workplace? Questions such as these are encouraged in students and any professional

experience activity will have a methodology in place (oral presentation, written assessment, joint assessment with their work place mentor etc), that will require students to undertake such reflection and consideration of their workplace experience.

Acknowledging the importance of this learning experience, most Charles Sturt University (CSU) students studying across the range of library and information studies programs undertake a two

or three week industry placement and, in addition, a guided four day study visit. This year, two study visits are being run in Sydney and Melbourne, and one each in Brisbane, Canberra and Perth timed to offer students

flexibility – some are in school holidays, others avoid those dates. Attendance on these study visits is compulsory except for the small number of students where it would be financially challenging (such as those living overseas) who then undertake a private study visit of a similar composition. Having said that, the last study visit I took (in Sydney) had a student resident in Spain fly over and attend (I'm sure they also caught up with family and friends too but it does show how seriously some of the students take this opportunity).

Organising and assessing placements for upwards of 250 students can be a challenge but the rewards are many, with students undertaking placements in a rich array of libraries and information agencies including The British and Bodleian Libraries in England, a NATO base library in Belgium, museum library in Cairo, international school libraries in a variety of countries and in many types of libraries and information agencies across Australia.

We get terrific feedback from students who, initially, may have had reservations about having to make the time to undertake a placement or study visit. And we've found that, despite the challenges of busy workplaces, the commitment shown by the vast majority of hosting organisations and mentors indicates a strong and flourishing interest in our profession and its development through a new generation of graduates.

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