

Augmenting Industry Collaboration with Architectural Practices through Development of Productive and Fair Work Placement Schemes

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SYNOPSIS

This project investigates how industrial engagements between Unitec and local architectural practices can be reinforced through work placement schemes providing Architectural Technology students with diverse learning opportunities in real world scenarios under professional supervision.

Arrangements are discussed around scheme structures highlighting factors for consideration seeking to provide clarity and confidence for participants in their overall understanding of the scheme, its intentions and participant obligations.

The aim is to establish guidelines regarding suitable arrangements for industry, Unitec and the students setting out clear organised structures whereby local practices feel more confident in their roles thus generating positive outcomes for all. This project promotes engaging local practices more within the learning experience of placement students whilst enhancing collaboration with college tutors. Methodology involves action research, literature review and reflective analysis discussions with teaching colleagues and scheme participants.

The first placement scheme was completed with a local architectural firm in July 2019. Ideas formulated in discussions with the practice have been a success based on feedback from participants. However, reflection has identified where lessons can be learnt in aspects such as marketing of scheme to students and amendments to this and other areas will be looked at in future schemes.

The enhanced collaboration opportunities provided by the internship schemes will effectively inform teaching within the Construction school and help tutors demonstrate current practice in their delivery. A successful scheme can also provide benefits to students, the company and the college in areas such as reputation as well as strengthening industrial links overall.

Keywords: Architectural, Internship, Learning, Work placement.

INTRODUCTION

This project resulted from initial discussions with a local architectural practice around sponsorship of awards for students on Unitec's Architectural Technology Diploma programme. Rather than just presenting a certificate, plaque or cheque, it was proposed that a period of work placement within a practice would be of more tangible benefit to student's future careers. Benefits to Unitec, the students and the company were identified and backed up by literature which also highlighted a major problem with internship schemes being paid or not (Curiale, 2010).

RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

A key motivation for the project was the opportunity to place students in real workplace scenarios which benefitted their academic studies and the educational aspects of internship type schemes led to the exploration of various work placement options. Another aim was to reinforce industrial links between Unitec and local architectural firms thereby helping Unitec ensure its Architectural Technology programmes are current, relevant and fit for purpose.

RESEARCH METHODS

The research methods for this study included action research, empirical research, literature review and reflective analysis. The study focuses on a scheme carried out in 2019 which was developed early in that year and completed in July. Information was garnered through informal interviews and discussion with participating practice staff from project conception through to completion. This process also collated scheme feedback from their side and opinions were also obtained from the two participating students.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Various issues in developing placement schemes came to light with major problems including timeline, practice commitment, whether payment is appropriate and the actual design of any suitable compensation model. The form and structure of any proposed scheme was also a challenge in terms of finding a format acceptable to all stakeholders although not every participating practice may necessarily employ the same scheme arrangements, e.g. timeline or agreed means of payment. Employment education schemes can take many forms and names including internships, externships, field attachments and work placement but typically involve working in a temporary position where the focus is on education rather than employment output by the student (Weible, 2009). Durations vary from perhaps a few days or weeks to much longer periods but our programme envisaged a duration of 2-3 weeks at most. Most schemes involve partnerships between the educational institution and the business company involved and provide full or part time experience based education (Bukaliya, 2012). An additional aim of this scheme was to reinforce industrial links with local architects as a way of improving Unitec's academic standing and reputation whilst also seeking to engage students in schemes primarily providing enhanced student learning through hands on experience (Furco, 1996). Potential industry participants will have to make large commitments in terms of time for mentoring and supervision and in certain schemes, payment to the student. Some countries specify this has to be minimum wage which for a two-week scheme of 37.5 hours per week in New Zealand adds up to a substantial sum of NZD1327.50. The whole issue of unpaid internships has been a hotly debated topic in various architectural press recently and some offices are reluctant to engage in schemes which could lead to possible adverse publicity. A practice in Chile, Elemental Architects actually ended unpaid internships for this reason having being drawn into a debate highlighted by the discovery that unpaid interns in Japan may have worked on a competition winning project for the Serpentine pavilion in London (Block, 2019). Suitably detailed discussions should be held with potential practices to allay any fears they may have of reputational damage whilst also avoiding any students placed in work being exploited. The issue is a sensitive one with unpaid internships being traditional in countries like Japan and in others the laws can be complex if they exist at all (Curiale, 2010). Forms of payment whether wages, college credits or scholarships can and have been part of discussions (Callanan & Benzing, 2004).

Other factors include how much remuneration, payment form whether wages or stipends and laws which could apply (Kovacic, Vasilescu, Filzmoser, Suppin, & Oberwinter, 2015). Literature does present many fiscal aspects for consideration but the situation with regards to architectural practices has not been adequately resolved. Some architects anonymously claim unpaid internships are traditional and therefore fine whereas in the UK where unpaid internships are illegal this attitude has sparked outrage. How to develop a scheme which sits well with relevant stakeholders and ensures no workers are exploited is a significant challenge whose solution could vary depending on geographical context. This report will focus on efforts to find consensus on these matters in New Zealand. The benefits to placement scheme stakeholders are well covered in literature covering students, educational institutions and participating companies and therefore seeking to develop a scheme which will work in the local New Zealand context seems worthwhile. Advantages for students include higher starting salaries, better career preparation whilst for employers they can potentially get first choice of the best students, a consideration which local companies have already identified during informal discussions. Colleges meanwhile can benefit from improved reputation, better student recruiting, professional discipline practitioner input, and the catalyst for this study, access to forms of funding such as scholarships.

This report describes efforts made to develop a work placement scheme pertaining to local educational institutes and architectural practices. A scheme which was completed across two weeks in July 2019 resulted from meetings and discussions with representatives from Jasmox and the scheme format was tailored to their specific needs and timeline. Variations on this format could be easily made to suit other interested practices. The scheme was introduced to Unitec students in May 2019 and applications from interested students sought by May 31st. Two interns were selected in mid-June and took up their 2 week placements on 1st July. Feedback on this initial iteration of the placement has been very positive on both sides and Jasmox want to repeat the scheme in 2020. Neither of the student participants felt exploited in any way regarding lack of wages and both felt that the experience of working in such a prestigious practice was payment enough whilst also augmenting their CVs. One student stated that they would recommend the experience despite the lack of payment as they felt benefits such as company connections, networking and career motivation outweighed the lack of salary.

RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE

The findings from this research will help inform the design of work placement schemes attractive to all stakeholders including payment issues and compensation models which sit comfortably with the practice and students involved. Open discussion on this issue will help allay fears by practices of student exploitation and highlight to students the many other tangible benefits of work placement. Factors for discussion with potential practices in addition to the above should include; scheme duration and timeline related to college academic calendar, marketing of scheme to the students in terms of format, commitment, timeline and possible duties during office placement, clarify application material required for scheme whether drawings or other media and allow sufficient time for students to collate. Ensure process is clear to students around application and submission of material for assessment. Clarify lines of communication between all parties including how students will be notified of success or otherwise. Consider the material students will submit for assessment, especially by company and workload for them involved. Establish good feedback processes involving all parties to improve future schemes and celebrate successful schemes making sure they are well publicised.

Resolution of the above will help produce a scheme acceptable to all and with good prospects of producing the benefits highlighted in literature.

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