How best to assess students taking work placements? An empirical investigation from Australian urban and regional planning

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ABSTRACT
Work placements (including internships) are common in urban and regional planning education but the relevant literature has largely overlooked their assessment and academic standards. To address this gap, the paper presents a study of this topic undertaken within the Australian context. The research involved systematically scoping the status of work placements in planning education in Australia, and exploring the perspectives of participating educators, practitioners and students on appropriate assessment methods and academic standards. We found significant and problematic divergence in these three key stakeholders’ perspectives. The implications of these findings are discussed in a national and international context. The consequent proposition is an approach to assessment and standards that promotes a shared understanding across these key stakeholders.

Introduction

As with other professional disciplines, work placements in urban and regional planning education are highly valued by students, academic staff and employers alike but student assessment can be problematic (Ferns & Zegwaard, 2014; Henderson & Trede, 2017; Trede & McEwen, 2016; Trede & Smith, 2014). An empirical investigation was undertaken in Australia in 2007–8 into the views of planning academics responsible for the overall management of work placements, the planning practitioners with whom students are placed, and the students themselves, on how best to assess the learning achieved in work placements. The findings provided the basis for a proposed negotiated learning plan to guide later assessment involving all parties, the intention being to provide a means of assessment that is both fair and accurate. Consideration is given to the contemporary relevance of this proposition and it is argued that the study findings are as pertinent today as they were 10 years ago.

By way of background for the study, urban planning, urban planning education and work placements are described, followed by a brief discussion as to why work placement
assessment can be problematic. Pedagogic concerns in the broader literature are then reviewed. Having set this context, the study methods and findings are presented and subsequently discussed in relation to current debates in the field.

Setting the context

Urban planning education and work placements

The academic discipline and profession once known as Town and Country Planning, now as Urban and Regional Planning, originated at the beginning of the twentieth century as a belated response to the appalling living conditions of the poorer parts of burgeoning industrialising cities in Britain and elsewhere (Engels, 1969; Rowntree, 1901). High death rates caused by infectious diseases affected all classes of people, so could no longer be ignored by national and city governments. Professions such as sanitary engineering and building surveying emerged. The early planners' task was to separate residential from industrial land use. They championed garden suburbs, retreats away from the noise, squalor and disease of industrialised cities' cores (Freestone, 1989).

The education of planners at universities initially was associated with that of engineers, surveyors and architects. Recently planning education has aligned more with the applied social sciences or with geography. Its ability to synthesise and to communicate across disciplines and professions is seen to be one of urban planning's core strengths. It covers technical, analytical, multicultural, ecological and design literacies (Sandercock, 1997), including skills in city plan making, subdivision design and processing planning applications, all in the context of giving students an appreciation of the political and resource constraints surrounding their future professional work. In such a wide-ranging programme of classroom-based study, a work placement gives a student some time away from university, to glimpse and perhaps to gain a footing in the professional world they are endeavouring to enter.

Urban and regional planning is a professional degree accredited by national planning institutes across the world. In the Australian case, examining boards are periodically appointed by the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) to visit university planning programmes to speak to all interested parties including students and employers, and then to report their findings and recommendations to the PIA and the university concerned. Because of the wide base of knowledge and skills involved, accrediting institutes allow university programmes to specialise to some degree, in design literacy or political economy for example. As a result, teaching methods and assessment procedures vary and are, to a large degree, at the discretion of academic teaching staff and, ultimately, their universities. Thus work placements in urban and regional planning education in Australia are not compulsory and, if offered, they vary in form and are assessed in different ways.

As to definition, a work placement involves a student spending a period of time during their degree away from the university, working in a planning role with a planning agency, public or private, in order to learn skills and gain experience for future professional work (Freestone, Thompson, & Williams, 2006). In North America, the term internship is used. Work-based learning is a closely related term, used when socialisation into future work and professional identity development is emphasised ((Henderson & Trede, 2017). Work-integrated learning applies when students are required to reflect and write about their work placement experiences in the context of the theoretical base and professional ethics
of their academic discipline (Smith, 2012). All these forms are evident in Australian urban and regional planning education and training. The terms ‘work placement’ and ‘work-based learning’ are used in the body of the paper. Fuller discussion of academic standards and assessment applied to work placement learning occurs in a later section.

**Pedagogical concerns**

A central and long-standing pedagogical concern for planning educators is the respective roles and contribution of universities, the profession and industry, and students themselves in light of a long-perceived divide in bridging practice and theory (Lord, 2014; Minnery, 2000; Myers & Banerjee, 2005; Phibbs, Gurran, & Mead, 2002; Sorensen & Auster, 1999; Taylor & Hurley, 2016). A manifestation and an outcome has been the emergence of a ‘practice-based’ theory movement in urban planning (Allmendinger, 2001; Hillier & Metzger, 2015; Watson, 2002). Greater credence is given here to inductive approaches, in which the activity of everyday planning practice is to the fore.

Planning education has responded in various ways to the ideas of practice capability, and the pedagogy of situated learning – that is, learning that takes place in the same context as it is practised (Frank, 2006; Hodges, Eames, & Coll, 2014). As noted, university planning schools through their professionally accredited curricula often require students to engage with ‘real world’ planning practice. Back in 2000, Minnery identified 25 main forms of practice education in urban and regional planning, including: student internships; paid employment; work experience; field trips; role-playing; group projects; studio-based teaching; and projects for ‘real’ clients. Various accounts of teaching practice in work-based education curricula, such as work placements, have demonstrated the potential for the planning discipline of developing Schön’s seminal idea of the reflective planning practitioner (1983; 1987). This has been evidenced through work-placement-based education for postgraduate students in the UK (Manns, 2003); planning internships in the USA (Brooks, Nocks, Farris, & Cunningham, 2002); and placement programmes for undergraduates in Australia (Coiacetto, 2004). Whilst there is no one standard model, work placements have generally been seen to provide an invaluable and distinctive form of learning, offering not only training for skills and competence (Kitchen, 2007), but a grounded approach to the development of meaningful theory and professional identity (Coiacetto, 2004). However, work placements have long been identified as posing ‘some of the greatest teaching and learning challenges in the entire curriculum’ (Kotval, 2003, p. 297). Key challenges continue and include: placements can be difficult to arrange or find (DeClou, Sattler, & Peters, 2013); the quality of the workplace learning environment and the benefits of the experience are notoriously difficult to assure (i.e. while some work placements offer a meaningful authentic planning work, other students may be merely photocopying or filing) (Ferns & Zegwaard, 2014); conditions for achieving quality in work-integrated-learning may be well rehearsed but are not easily achieved (Yorke & Vidovich, 2014); and work placements can be institutionally compromised through lack of support, resources or appropriate staffing arrangements (DeClou et al., 2013).

Despite these identified challenges within the literature, work placements offer the possibility of realistic, contextualised experiences of practice and thus remain a major form of work-based learning in planning education (Patrick et al., 2008). They afford an important opportunity for the achievement of desirable academic standards of professional practice.
Within the context of the formal planning education curriculum, these achievements often need to be assessed – an important, yet largely under-explored pedagogical question has been, how?

**Assessment and academic standards in work placement-based learning**

In professional education, including urban and regional planning, it is important to be able to assess the extent to which an aspiring professional has achieved acceptable standards of professional and workplace capability. There are evident risks to the public, to employers and to the profession if certain standards are not met. While in the broad discipline of planning, the risks of not achieving capability are not always clear cut, they are, nevertheless, there. Questions of academic assessment in work placement cannot therefore be divorced from a consideration of how academic standards are constituted. Academic standards focus attention on what should be taught and how it should be assessed. They accord value to students’ work and differentiate levels of quality in that work. They concern comparability within and across institutions (Smith, 2014). Generating academic standards for work-placement-based planning education requires negotiating the particularly complex issues and diverse contexts that give shape to practice, learning and assessment (Yorke, 2011). This has proven to be a serious challenge for planning educators and practitioners.

The challenges around determining academic standards for work-based placements have been foreshadowed more broadly in wider educational pedagogy and assessment debates. Almost two decades ago a central (explanatory and normative) concept and area of debate in the literature on academic assessment and standards was that of ‘authenticity’. Essentially, this related to the design of assessment around the accomplishment of significant and meaningful tasks, often referred to as real-world challenges, requiring the demonstration of capabilities and attributes (Gulikers, Bastiaens, & Kirschner, 2004).

A particular goal of ‘authentic assessment’ was that the learning experience, outcomes and their assessment should sit neatly and holistically together – authentic achievement and authentic assessment go hand in hand. However, any pursuit of authenticity – of ensuring a consistent fit between assessment practices and learning outcomes – has to traverse the difficult terrain of the multiple and competing interpretations that students, educators and workplace supervisors bring to their engagement in the practice learning process (Hodges et al., 2014).

Furthermore, as Henderson and Trede (2017) note, the academic responsible for organising placement learning is commonly distant from the student’s work place, so not a direct witness to that learning. As such it could be argued, for example, that the student will know better what they have or have not learnt and this, in turn, could suggest a central role for self or student peers in the design of work placement assessment (Hawe & Dixon, 2016). Observations such as these prompt the question: how best might planning practitioners, academics and students collaborate to more fairly and accurately assess students’ work placement learning?

One significant review of models of good assessment practice in work-integrated-learning (Hodges, Smith, & Jones, 2004) has more broadly suggested a need to adopt both performance-based and portfolio approaches:

If we accept that the two key components of learning outcomes are the performance of the student (that incorporates both process/means and output/ends) and what the student has
actually learned from the placement, then a combination of the performance-based and portfolio approaches can meet both these needs (p. 52).

As Hodges, Smith and Jones elaborate, a performance-based assessment will generally adopt a criteria-referenced approach to identify workplace performance outcomes and how these will be assessed. Two limitations of performance-based assessment are often noted and specifically apply to planning education and work placement assessment.

Firstly, student learning on placement is seen to involve more than the demonstration of competent workplace performance. Students learn about workplace culture and the communities of practice to which they aspire (Hodges et al., 2004). They also learn much about themselves (Dawson, 1989). There is a risk that pre-specifying performance outcomes, especially in the form of required workplace competencies, can constrain some of the most important learning (Higgs, 2014).

Secondly, some argue that performance-based assessment risks being partial – not fully capturing the practice being learnt or the learning processes involved. Where the work and professional context is characterised as one of uncertainty, change and contingency, practice achievements become hard to assess through applying a simple series of check boxes (Knight & Yorke, 2003). Reflexivity, sense-making and creativity are some of the features to be nurtured, and allowing for their expression in the ‘learning journey’ can become problematic when assessment is driven by a focus on competent performance.

In response to these concerns, the use of portfolios has become a prominent tool to encourage diverse, reflective and creative learning through a semi-structured format (Green, Wyllie, & Jackson, 2014; Klenowski, 2002; Mabry, 1999). Portfolios can include a wide range of evidence from multiple sources, with students being involved in determining the criteria for selection and judging the merit (Hodges et al., 2004); and there has been increasing interest in the use of e-portfolios (Comfort & Ferns, 2014; Stefani, Mason, & Pegler, 2007).

However, portfolio assessment, whilst common within planning education, is also problematic. It may be difficult to generalise from materials selectively included in the portfolio by the student. Interviews or presentations, for example, may be required to strengthen inferences drawn. The intrinsic uniqueness of each portfolio represents a challenge for assessors in achieving acceptable consistency between themselves and across the student cohort. Further to this, the sheer volume of material can become unwieldy and overly demanding of staffing resource (Ferns & Zegwaard, 2014; Hodges et al., 2004).

Thus whilst portfolio approaches may better capture the ‘complex learning outcomes’ (Knight & Yorke, 2004) associated with work-based-placement learning, it is not self-evident whether and how portfolio materials should be utilised in the allocation of formal academic grades. Nevertheless, many advocates within the ePortfolio movement remain convinced that it is this approach, implemented with requisite training and support structures, that offers the most promising way forward for professional education attuned to the twenty-first century (Clarke & Eynon, 2009; McDermot & Gallagher, 2011; Pelliccione & Dixon, 2008; Rowley, 2017).

Lastly, it is worth noting that, as the student goes about their workplace practice, they will receive feedback – formally but also informally – on how they are doing. In this sense, they are being assessed continuously and need to know how to make use of the feedback they receive. They are going to need to be able to sustain responsiveness to feedback as an integral part of their future professional lives – hence the suggested importance of nurturing ‘sustainable assessment’ as propounded by Boud and Falchikov (2005). Work-based
learning affords students a multitude of sources and kinds of feedback, and consequently it is necessary to recognise that all the parties to assessment need to be considering how this is occurring 'in situ' as well as in any final determination of grades or pass/fail determinations.

How then are academic standards and assessment practices realised by those engaged in work-based learning in the context of planning education? Not only do the various parties bring their own accustomed ways of understanding assessment and learning to the venture, they must also find ways of working together to create the triangular relationship between student, university and workplace on which work-based learning is predicated. Without concerted attention to the question of assessment and standards in planning practice education, and any methodical approach to creating a shared understanding, there is a strong possibility that what may well occur in the day-to-day reality is a variation on the age-old theme of 'muddling through' (Lindblom, 1959).

In light of the few studies specific to assessment practices and standards in workplace-based planning education, the paper turns now to our empirical Australian investigation of stakeholders' understandings of the matter, since they found themselves, by virtue of their engagement in the activity, charged with making their own sense of it.

**Research methods and data collection**

The research was undertaken in 2007–2008 using a two-stage process. To begin, a literature review and scoping exercise was undertaken to map the then current status of work-place-based education in Australia. A qualitative study followed, exploring the perspectives of key stakeholders engaged in work placement planning education (university educators, practitioners who supervise placement students and placement students themselves). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 'providers' of the work placement learning environment (educators and practitioners) and focus groups were conducted with the recipients (students).

The scoping exercise, through searching publicly available online and hard copy documentation, identified 43 planning programmes formally accredited by the PIA. As indicated in the context setting above, work placement is not required for accreditation but is seen as desirable. Within the 43, 11 were undergraduate programmes containing a form of work placement, which the project then investigated through further documentary scanning (later clarified as necessary during interviews conducted with the relevant planning educators from those programmes). For a summary of key points arising from this 2007 scan of accredited planning programmes, see Table 1.

Within the Australian context, the time that students were required to spend in the workplace varied from 12 weeks' practical experience prior to graduation, to 60 days. The assessment components of these work placements also varied. Work practice was graded at only five institutions. The type of assessment varied within each course, using work plans, personal diaries, presentations, seminars and reports. Supervisor reports were a feature in some programmes but generally not graded.

The project proceeded to focus in depth on 3 of these 11 planning programmes, those of the collaborating universities and their structured work placement courses at Griffith University (Queensland), RMIT University (Victoria) and La Trobe University (Victoria). The project concentrated on undergraduate programmes because, unlike the US context, only a minority of postgraduate programmes had a formal work placement component. Adopting
a qualitative approach, the project engaged with the key stakeholders in the work-place-
ment-based components of these three programmes, namely planning educators, planning
practitioners (workplace supervisors) and planning students. Two main methods were used
to explore the perspectives of each of these stakeholder groups, semi-structured in-depth
interviews (planning educators and planning practitioners) and focus groups (planning
students). A semi-structured interview schedule was devised to guide conversations with
the educators and practitioners to ensure a consistent and focused line of questioning, as
well as the flexibility for interviewees to pursue their own line of reasoning (drawing on
the understanding by Fontana and Frey (2000) of interview as negotiated text). Interviews
were taped and transcribed wherever possible; in a few instances detailed field notes were
produced.

To widen the exploration of planning educator perspectives, 12 interviews were con-
ducted with academics involved in the provision of work-based learning across the 11
Australian universities that provided work placements. All were experienced academics
in the planning discipline, with nine engaged directly in workplace learning programmes
for their students. A series of pilot interviews with academics from the three universities
involved in the study had been conducted previously and the final interview schedule was
shaped accordingly.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were also conducted with planning practitioners
who had supervised work placement students (that is, who had acted as workplace supervi-
sors for planning students on placement at their organisation) from the three collaborating
universities. Forty practitioners were recruited. These covered three different Australian
regions: metropolitan Melbourne in Victoria; rural and regional Victoria; and the adjoining
areas of northern New South Wales and south east Queensland including Brisbane and the
Gold Coast. Several practitioners had, over time, supervised students from more than one
university.

Finally, four focus groups were conducted with 34 students from two of the three collab-
orating universities, who had experienced work-placement-based education in the previous
year. (For reasons related to timing and geography, it unfortunately became unfeasible to
gain the participation of students from one of the three universities.) Focus groups were

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Table 1. Planning education in Australia: Accredited programmes and work placement.

| Undergraduate and postgraduate planning education |
|------------------------------------------------|
| • Urban and regional planning is an umbrella term that covers a wide range of sectors |
| • There are 43 academic programs in Australia accredited by PIA that include planning education |
| • Accredited programs occur at both undergraduate and postgraduate level including: |
| • 19 programs offering Bachelor Degrees |
| • 6 programs offering a Postgraduate Diploma |
| • 18 programs offering Masters Degrees |
| • There are 19 undergraduate programs accredited by PIA, across 11 tertiary institutions |
| • 11 of these 19 accredited undergraduate programs contain a form of work practice |
| • There are 24 accredited postgraduate programs, across 14 tertiary institutions |
| • Work practice is a formal component in 4 (2 of these as electives) of the 24 postgraduate programs |
| • Work practice is a formal component in planning programs at 9 tertiary institutions |

Source: Hobsons Australia, 2007; PIA (2005) for list of accredited courses; each tertiary institution website including, among
others, Griffith University (2007); La Trobe University (2007); The University of New England (2007); University of South
Australia (2007); University of Tasmania (2007); some information later adjusted following interviews with planning academicians.
employed as the key strategy for engaging with student perspectives, harnessing the power of group interaction to produce data that would not be as easily accessible without the group interaction (Cameron, 2000, p. 84; Janesick, 1998). Focus groups were an opportunity for student participants to ‘explore different points of view, and formulate and reconsider their own ideas and understandings’ (Cameron, 2000, p. 86). A detailed written record was made of the responses from each of the four focus groups.

Table 2 outlines the types of questions and matters that were addressed in the interviews and focus groups.

A thematic analysis was undertaken on the qualitative data captured from the interviews and focus groups (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through careful reading of transcript summaries and discussion, emergent themes were identified. A two-day, face-to-face workshop for the full research team was convened to consider notes from the different areas of the project enquiry to assist understanding and synthesising of the findings from the project inquiry. To this end, the thematic analysis focused on: (i) the nature of work placement education; (ii) the attitudes of the three stakeholders towards it; and most importantly, (iii) how they thought about and discussed assessment and standards in such education.

The interview and focus group process was approached as an exercise in communication and the building of shared meaning, rather than on the basis of a pure or objective ‘observer/observed’ relationship (Silverman, 2006). Consequently, some follow-up communications with participants were used as testing spaces for ideas and theories – that is, participants were themselves involved in processes of analysis and theme-building, and in jointly exploring ideas raised by other participants. Hence, the project sought to maximise the benefits of using rich interview and dialogue techniques, mindful of their oft perceived limitations (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

**Discussion**

All three groups (i.e. educators, practitioners, students) placed importance on the process of reflecting on experiences for learning in and from the workplace, albeit in different ways. In their responses, it was clear that all three stakeholder groups placed high value on the benefits of being actively involved in work placements, supporting the findings of Freestone et al. (2006) and Coiacetto (2008). While there were some criticisms, for example from a minority of the planning educators who seriously questioned the value and viability of work placement, this study strongly confirms what other studies have found, that work-placement confers benefits such as: exposure to real-life complexities of planning; helping bridge the divide between planning theory and practice; and, providing a springboard to employment or helping define students’ career paths.

However, the three key stakeholder groups were found to have quite different perspectives, or default positions, when it came to assessment and standards. Three rather different positions are evident, and it is this disjuncture that sits at the focus of our study and findings. Arguably, it constitutes a barrier to a shared understanding of assessment and standards – and thus to the closer integration of theory and practice through the work placement experience. Let us explore these stakeholder perspectives in more detail.
Table 2. Summary of indicative research questions.

| Indicative research questions                                                                 |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| **Educator interviews**                                                                     |
| • What are the varieties/dimensions of practice-based education?                            |
| • What is the nature of assessment for practice-based education?                            |
| • What is the history of practice-based education within the degree/overall programme, and the role of assessment? |
| **Practitioner interviews**                                                                 |
| • Describe your experience in supervision of work-placement students?                        |
| • What are the workplace arrangements with placement students?                              |
| • How do you learn to supervise, student experiences?                                       |
| • What knowledge do you have of the university placement programme?                          |
| • What do you understand about the learning assessment and standards?                        |
| **Student focus groups**                                                                    |
| • Describe your work placement experience (nature duration, etc.)                            |
| • Whilst on work practice placement, to what extent did you understand the standards that you were expected to meet? |
| • Whilst on work practice placement, to what extent what was your work assessed in an appropriate way? |
| • Who do you believe should be involved in any effort to enhance standards and assessment in planning practice education? |
| • What suggestions do you have for improving the teaching/learning process for students in planning education? |
**Planning educators**

The interviewed planning educators directly involved in workplace-based learning tended to bring to education a practice orientation, having had involvement in or exposure to practice themselves. They also reported operating in conditions of resource constraints, and lack of workload recognition. The staff resource issues for both university and organisations hosting work placements were serious considerations in realising high-quality student experiences. In the words of one participant,

> If practice-based education is important, then we better resource it sufficiently – if it is a course, then the university has to resource is appropriately.

The educators were quite overt and articulate about assessment and standards though not necessarily as focused on theoretically framing or justifying the choices made. They tended to see assessment in workplace-based learning in *formal* terms with the emphasis on reflection that is abstracted from the workplace situation. Their view of assessment is of needing to encourage reflective rather than mechanistic practice. Although evidently underpinned by models of experiential and reflective learning, for example, not all the educators were necessarily fluent in related educational pedagogies.

The educators emphasised assessment as being a critical exploration of what has been undertaken in, observed during and/or learned from the experiences rather than focusing on skills that have or have not been acquired. With an eye to academic standards and course grading, however, assessment tasks for work placement-based education courses generally adopted a not dissimilar form to those for any other course. Students would produce textual assignments – reports, studies, posters, accounts derived from an accumulation of their experiences – that would be presented and/or submitted for marking.

The less university-based the assignment, the more likely it would not be graded beyond pass / fail. Such simple grading protected planning educators from being accused of awarding inaccurate or unfair grades. The focus is on the ability to abstract from the workplace experience and communicate ideas from it. Assessing workplace learning and/or performance itself is seen as problematic.

Generally, educators were cautious about having too many expectations of workplace supervisors about their participation in student assessment. Reasons for this were typically the difficulties in ensuring control over the quality of student experiences; working with the different levels of experience on the part of employers; and moderating assessment appropriately.

**Planning practitioners (workplace supervisors)**

Assessment and academic standards were not at the forefront of the minds of practitioner-supervisors. For various reasons, and commonly lacking time to familiarise themselves with material provided, they were not very clear on the university’s objectives and sought more guidance. They would also like students to be clearer about what they want to get out of placement, and to come into work placement with a better idea of their own learning objectives:

> It is important students reflect on what they learn. To do this, and to assist supervisors, they need an after-and-before framework of skills acquisition: of time and project management, for example. Something that could be written up in their journal.
Generally, assessment was approached as a relatively informal process that occurs in the day-to-day interaction between themselves and the student. It was intrinsic to the student being there to learn through their workplace experience. Largely, they wanted the experience to be an encouraging and nurturing one for their students, seeing learning as something that should be enjoyable, positive and open-ended. With limited understanding of university assessment and standards, their aims for the students under their supervision concerned building personal and professional confidence and providing opportunity to confirm basic capabilities. Time spent by students with them in the workplace was viewed as being just one component in the students’ overall programme, only one episode in the ongoing development of professional practice. But while they were quite keen to be involved in the planning education, many were averse to the prospect of overly structured and formalised assessment, preferring instead to think of attending to personalised student goals set within a longer term career development process.

The majority of supervisors worked from an assumption that there should be flexible goals and objectives for each student placement. This logically led them to a highly personalised approach to assessment and standards. Building on something like a skills portfolio, or a clearly articulated vision of a career trajectory, a student might then sit down with academic staff and/or their workplace supervisor and develop some personal goals and aspirations which their performance could be assessed against. From this perspective, students needed to have an ongoing, building sense of practice and where they might fit in it through the duration of their degree – linking their developing capabilities and work interests with different kinds of practice-based learning throughout their studies.

**Planning students**

The students involved in the focus groups sit in between these two perspectives or default positions. Students commenting on their perceptions of assessment and standards in structured work-placement courses were not unaware of the potential dissonance between workplace and university perspectives. They were sometimes not clear on what they were expected to do and learn in the workplace. They also saw, and were sometimes resentful, that they do learn a lot in the workplace but that the assessment emphasises the formal and extrinsic over what is actually learned and done in the workplace. As this student articulated:

I was quite angry … I understand that there are problems that you can't get marked on your work placement. But there must be some common middle ground though. Like we're out there working three days a week but we're getting marked on assignments … It is an interesting exercise but it is just that we're getting marked on that when considering what you might be doing now during your work placement …

When one focus group moderator explained that it can be difficult to assess students in the workplace, some students were unconvinced. For instance, another student responded:

… a lot of other people in different courses like teachers have to be assessed out in the classroom. You can't just send someone out, ‘Alright, here, start teaching’ and that's it and not have anyone comment on how you're actually teaching. It is the same with this.

The notion that it might not really matter what one did on placement was taken by some to a more sophisticated level. Realising that the value of their placement rested very much on knowing personally what they wanted to get out of it, some students appreciated it was for them to develop their own learning goals and assume responsibility for directing their
learning on placement. Yet, in the words of one student, ‘you don’t really know what you should be getting out of it’.

**How do we get more out of workplace assessment and learning?**

Although work placement education is challenging and problematic as this study demonstrated, such education and the learning that comes from it are valued by all three key stakeholder groups: planning academics, planning practitioners and planning students. On this there is agreement. However, on the matter of assessment, critical to the achievement of satisfactory standards of performance in professional practice and indeed the conferral of the university planning degree award, there was no agreement, particularly around how academic assessment and standards should be set in a work-based learning context.

Traditional assessment through written assignments or other ‘pieces of work’ that are handed in by the student for marking by the academic may provide evidence of the student’s critical, analytic and reflective abilities. There is no doubt this is important. However, these methods are not designed to capture the quality of practice that the student has enacted during the work placement, or indeed the way they have integrated those critical, analytic and reflective abilities into their actual practice. It is clear that students recognise this dissonance. They sense that such assessment methods are not particularly ‘fit for purpose’ (Herrington & Herrington, 2006; Hodges et al., 2004) – simplistically put, they feel they are not being tested on what they were in placement to learn.

To some extent, this sense of academic standards that is removed from the student experience is difficult to avoid, and is not altogether undesirable. If the learning objective is for students to stand aside from the workplace experience and show they can analyse, critique and reflect from the university vantage point what they found in the world of work, then perhaps this is a valid way to do it. Let professional standards take care of the capabilities students display in the workplace, and preserve academic standards in the university domain.

For the purposes of this paper, the important issues for further consideration became: [1] is it possible to have a sense of academic standards less removed from the immediacy of workplace learning, more fitting to purpose (Hodges et al., 2004; Trede & McEwen, 2016); [2] is it possible to create a more convergent set of expectations and perspectives across the three key stakeholders to assessment in workplace learning (Horstmanshof & Moore, 2016; Winchester-Seeto, Rowe, & Mackaway, 2016); and, [3] how can one best progress a well-crafted approach to assessment when they are so many diverse factors and challenges impacting on the workplace learning environment (Smith, Ferns, & Russell, 2014)

**Ways forward**

**Proposition: the negotiated learning plan**

Work-based learning speaks to a rich combination of practice capabilities. Aligning work practice with academic standards situates practice as a complex achievement embracing intellectual, moral and practical domains (Trede & Smith, 2014). A simplistic and overly certain imposition of standards into the fluid and diverse contexts of workplace-based planning education would therefore quickly flounder. In this context, we suggest from our study that the choice for individual programmes and even perhaps individual placements
is best found from a spectrum of Assessment Frameworks to suit the context specific situation (particularly institutional), rather than a singular prescriptive model. To this end, in our proposition we have drawn from the principles of performance-based assessment outlined by Hodges et al. (2004), but adapted and expanded to be flexible to account for the diversity and range of work placement experience and of learning. The intention is not to replace university-based reflective assessment, but build on this to afford greater weighting to assessment that is more grounded in practice.

In what is proposed, the focus is on frameworks to achieve better communication and shared understanding across the parties to work placement learning. Our study suggested that there is too much scope for misunderstanding and misaligned expectations. Facilitating a clearer and more purposeful approach to assessment can strengthen the learning and highlight student workplace achievements. Yet, introducing a more methodical approach will not be viable unless the distinctive characteristics of the workplace learning environment in planning education are recognised – and principally, this means building in sufficient flexibility to the assessment frameworks to accommodate the great diversity of contexts in which they are to be implemented.

The proposed Negotiated Learning Plan, below, addresses many of these concerns. It was in an emergent form of work placement assessment as the research for Jones et al. (2009), the base reference in this paper, was being conducted and in 2009 was formally built into the RMIT planning work placement course requirements. With specific reference to the research of educators, practitioners and students above, it moves away from the perceived over-emphasis on just the formal assessment of placement students’ reflections on their experience. Rather, it takes up practitioners’ recommendations for students to be clearer about what they want from their placement and their willingness to assist students build up their skills portfolio, and so their self-confidence as budding practitioners. Importantly, it responds to students’ irritation that much of what students learn on placement is not assessed. It is designed to better recognise the immediacy of workplace learning; to enable a more convergent set of expectations between university, employers and students; and it allows for the diversity of work placements.

Table 3 suggests how the framework might be developed.

‘Broad Areas of Assessment’ would be largely determined by the academic responsible for work placements in light of enunciated learning objectives, objectives endorsed by the accrediting profession or industry. These would likely centre on the more technical or applied aspects of the discipline or profession involved. In planning, for example, they might focus on the further development of practical skills introduced earlier in class, for example,
the application of research and design skills in working up a strategic or structural plan for an area. The list would be long to cover most common eventualities. From this list the student, depending on their placement and consideration of their existing strengths and weaknesses, sets out their ‘Personalised Learning Goals’. These are submitted for numerical academic assessment within 10 working days of starting a placement, so giving the student sufficient time to adjust to their new learning environment. They give students a basis from which to work up ‘Negotiated Work Tasks’ with their work placement supervisor. Work supervisors also have to make an early judgement on the existing competencies of their placement students and set appropriate tasks.1 ‘Progress Reviews’ can be called by the work supervisor or student and, if necessary, involve the responsible academic. Depending on a student’s progress and ever-changing work schedules of the work place, ‘Revisions to Plan’ are made, to be adjusted again if necessary. With academic oversight, student and work supervisor actively engage in determining the student’s learning process.

At the end of the placement an ‘Areas and Levels of Achievement’ is written up. The format and amount of detail involved is suggested by the responsible academic. The first draft should be done by the student with reference to their ‘Personalised Learning Goals’ and ‘Negotiated Work Tasks’. Work placement supervisors’ comments will be subsequently added. The final draft is signed off by student and supervisor. Thus, a systematic and critical review of the student’s placement progress is reached and forwarded to the responsible academic.

Given the complexities involved, not least the variety of placements and the variable relationships between supervisor and student, RMIT’s version of ‘Areas and Levels of Achievement’ was never quantified for assessment purposes. It is indicative and designed in part to address some of the students’ concerns about past failures to assess what is actually learnt in the workplace. Along with ‘Ongoing Development’, it is also written for the student’s later use as a road map to assist them in develop their own learning objectives when they return to full-time university studies and afterwards. This takes us beyond how best numerically to assess work placement performance:2 towards students learning to become more self-critical as intending professionals; towards them setting their own standards, both technically and ethically; towards all parties realising self-assessment cannot be reduced to numbers.

Working to a Negotiated Learning Plan framework creates a stronger sense of shared purpose across stakeholders whilst allowing for significant individualisation for each student. But this is on the presumption that the stakeholders have a shared understanding of what it means and how it should be used (Alexander, 2005). An implication here is that the quality of communication across the stakeholders is very high. The university and planning industry would need to be actively engaged and committed in conjoint activity to achieve this (Henderson & Trede, 2017), and students appropriately prepared and equipped. This further implies dedicating staff resource to the activity, a point emphasised by the planning practitioners interviewed. Clearly, the professional accrediting body and / or planning schools would be crucial to generating a widely shared pursuit of common assessment areas.

This all said, the various challenges noted earlier have to be addressed. Placements can be difficult to arrange or find, thus dedicated administrative resources are needed and the planning school ideally is located in a populous city or region with a buoyant economy. Even if placements can be found, their quality needs to be assured; to this end, induction courses for potential supervisors complemented by site visits by university staff ideally are necessary. In short, Negotiated Learning Plans involve significant inputs from university
support staff, academics, employers and students; they are a costly exercise and require significant institutional support (DeClou et al., 2013; Orrell, Cooper, & Jones, 1999). But as Brooks et al. (2002) and later, Jackson (2017) noted, the improvement in the quality of the students’ written work indicates the richness and subtleties of their learning.

It should be stressed that through the Negotiated Learning Plan process, a work supervisor gains an early idea of the student’s capabilities so can better mentor him/her, while employers, keen to recruit high-quality staff, can ‘road test’ future graduates. Indeed, Table 3 indicates if Negotiated Learning Plans are to work as desired, a significant investment of planning agencies’ staff time – in effect unpaid time – in mentoring paid students is needed. Without their input the potential for better assessing what students actually learn on placement is significantly reduced. Through their encouragement and nurturing, they impart formative, hard-to-quantify learnings that students highly value and draw on long after leaving university (Jackson, 2017).

**Observations on the relevance of the negotiated learning plan in 2017**

Urban and regional planning is replete with plans that were never successfully implemented; even well-researched plans that had broad political, developer and community acceptance often failed to deliver what was intended (McLoughlin, 1992). Likewise, since 2009 when the Negotiated Learning Plan was introduced in RMIT University’s Urban and Regional Planning Programme, its implementation has had its problems. Various reasons can be cited.

In the broadest terms, the neoliberal ascendancy over government policies and public life in Australia remains as strong in 2017 as it was in 2009. For example, under its principle that direct beneficiaries not taxpayers should pay for educational services, there is continuing bipartisan political support for indexed student fees, currently approximately $AUS 32,000 for a four-year urban planning degree at RMIT, $AUS 2340 tied to undertake a work placement. In turn as students are expected to pay their own way, so are universities. Edwards, Perkins, Pearce, and Hong (2015) in their review of work-integrated learning in Australian universities – one centred on the sciences, technology and engineering but including environmental science, so overlapping with urban and regional planning – cite scarcity of resources as a factor making organising work placements problematic. While Australian students pay substantial fees and might reasonable expect their universities to offer off-campus work placements, this appears not to be the general case.

Specific to Queensland planning students, Grant-Smith and McDonald (2016) note the predominance of unpaid, student-found work placements not tied formally to university study: in effect, the predominance of work-(non)integrated learning. Indeed, extra unpaid work is being taken by those for whom paid work placements were organised, in this instance, by Griffith University, the Queensland University of the 2009 survey. They argue the increase in unpaid placements relates to planning students’ desire to build professional networks in what they perceive to be a tight job market. Such unpaid work, according to the (Australian) Fair Work Ombudsman (2013), should be mainly observational but in practice it is not. Grant-Smith and McDonald conclude by wondering whether student-generated planning work placements are essential experience or essentially exploitative.

But in Melbourne there has been a continuing building boom since before 2009, so no tightness in the job market for junior planners is evident, and until 2014 and a change in RMIT planning management arrangements, all placements were paid at rates generally
above what students would be paid in the hospitality and retail sector, where most students find casual work.

Thus, student fees aside, the job market and payment conditions seem to favour the full and successful implementation of Negotiated Learning Plans. But it was generally only the older and/or the high achieving students who submitted, after consultation with their placement supervisor, fully developed Negotiated Learning Plans for assessment and academic feedback, then to become a base line to monitor and evaluate their subsequent performance. Generally, such students had supportive work placement supervisors willing to assist students in these tasks.

Given it was the more mature students who fully embraced Negotiated Learning Plans, possibly too much was expected of largely 20- and 21-year-old undergraduate students. A lack of pre-work placement preparation, not only of students but of workplace supervisors is also a likely contributing cause and this returns us to questions of the time and resources universities are prepared, and able, to devote to such labour-intensive activities.

In the case of Australian urban planning, there is no professional requirement that graduates do work placements. It is a choice made by individual universities, and their urban planning departments. In 2014 in light of broader politico-economic circumstances and local management decisions, the RMIT urban and regional planning programme decided to cut placements from 60 to 30 days, to allow for unpaid placements and to not continue with Negotiated Learning Plans.

But the central proposition made here still holds: by adopting Negotiated Learning Plans, the expected standard of students’ work and its assessment can be much more accurately gauged than historically has been the case. The act of students, academics and practitioners co-jointly negotiating a learning plan is also a means of delivering better quality experiences: setting some agreed learning goals can be a way out of the filing and photocopying that besets some work placements. In addition, students become actively engaged in determining professional development goals and relating work placement to career learning activities both prior to and after their placement experiences (Table 3).

Central to our ongoing proposition is that purposively assessing the learning that happens in the work placement – informed by the principles behind the Negotiated Learning Plan – offers a way forward in a variety of situations and contexts, not just Australia. In effect, the mixed fortunes of Negotiated Learning Plans in RMIT’s Urban and Regional Planning Programme is a case study others can learn from when seeking to better assess students taking work placements.

**Conclusion**

Within urban planning practice education, work placements offer a key practical, conceptual and experiential site for bridging the practice-theory divide. In this paper, we have argued that the assessment of the learning that happens both around and during the work placement is the situated meeting ground for the three key stakeholders (educators, practitioners and students) with an interest in planning education. A focus on learning and assessment in work placement, and how that assessment and the standards of assessment are perceived by these key stakeholders, is therefore of crucial importance.

Unlike the broader professional literature in Australia (Ferns & Zegwaard, 2014; Henderson & Trede, 2017; Trede & McEwen, 2016; Trede & Smith, 2014), there has been little
in the urban planning literature which has dealt with assessment in work-placement-based education. Earlier studies (Coiacetto, 2004; Manns, 2003) of work placements emphasised the principles of reflective practice (see also Schön, 1983, 1987). However, more formal questions of assessment and academic standards in work-based learning and planning practice education have been largely deflected due to the complexity and difficulty in developing appropriate standards (Higgs, 2014) and issues of requisite institutional support (Smith et al., 2014). This omission warrants attention. If the planning practitioners who supervise placement students, the managing academics and the placement students themselves cannot find common understanding in assessment in work placement, then the integration of theory and practice in education must remain an elusive goal.

This study offers a rigorous exploration of work-based learning assessment and standards. It suggests that although the ideas of practice-based education, and workplace-based education in particular, have well-established roots, the assessment aspect of this has scope for further development within academic programmes of urban and regional planning.

Henderson and Trede (2017) have recently written about facilitating collaborative governance arrangements between academia, industry and students in Australia in order to strengthen students’ learning during work placement. In the original investigation of 2009, however, there was little evidence of a shared understanding between the key stakeholders of academic standards in work place-based education. The introduction of the Negotiated Learning Plan in the Urban and Regional Planning Programme at RMIT University at this time sought to generate such understandings. But in its original formulation, too much perhaps were expected of younger students and their sometimes inexperienced work supervisors, matters that could be addressed through better university and programme resourcing, specifically more substantial pre-placement briefings of both students and work placement supervisors, and if needed, more academic site visits to discuss student progress; and the introduction of mandatory Negotiated Work Plan requirements. While aware of the financial constraints on universities seeking to deliver programmes as they might ideally want to, we suggest that the Negotiated Learning Plan potentially provides a simple, adaptable and practical means of communicating shared learning objectives and then, of both achieving and assessing them, and through this goal, it can make a contribution to the definition of standards of practice in planning: ultimately perhaps, for better achieving those ever-elusive connections between theory and practice.

1  Note: employers select RMIT work placement planning students through a competitive interview process so have a prior sense of students’ competency levels.
2  Numerical assessment at RMIT Planning is also based on (1) submission of a Reflective Report of their work placement experiences, responding in part to subheadings suggested by the responsible academic, and other subheadings of their own choosing; (2) their individual contributions to mock planning tribunal appeals in which each student is given a role to play based on actual recent planning disputes – as professionals, affected property owners, developers, etc. – presenting in front of an actual tribunal chairperson. They are jointly assessed by that person and the responsible academic. Professional ethical dilemmas are discussed in class based on hypothetical situations and students’ own work placement experiences, but students are not formally assessed.

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