5 issues with student clinical work placements and how to tackle them

How leading universities are gaining a significant advantage in the race to place students into work experience positions.

The future of learning is in the workplace

From healthcare to education, social services to law, degree programs incorporate significant blocks of workplace learning. Such learning is crucial to a student's growth, providing a practical opportunity to apply classroom knowledge in real-world situations.

According to a study from the Swinburne Centre for New Workforce, work-integrated learning is only going to grow in the future. The report states that learning-integrated work – "where learning is increasingly taken off campus and immersed in disruptive work environments" – is getting more important with the rise of digital technologies.[1]

Universities must prepare for this future, now

Universities must prepare for this growth in workplace learning – which means preparing for the logistical challenge of connecting thousands of students with thousands of different workplace opportunities.

In nursing, for example, already 50% of a student's time is spent on the wards. Yet, acccording to Birks et al, student nurses are critical of the lack of time they have to prepare for placements.[2] To boost their reputation and ranking, universities need to tackle such issues head-on.

With competition fierce, every placement counts

Across the globe, student numbers are rising. Yet in most industries, the availability of placements is not. Competition between universities for placement positions is rife.

To stay at the top of their game and ensure that their students don't miss out on placements, universities need to:

- **Be trusted data custodians** – responsible for keeping all students' private information and documentation secure
- **Streamline and speed up the placement process** – replacing paper-based, ad-hoc systems with one central system
- **Better align students with the appropriate placements** – so that students are consistently sent to the right work experience jobs at the right time
- **Empower students to have a say about placements** – to boost the student experience and enhance the reputation of the university
- **Gain complete visibility across all placements** – to ensure more strategic relationship-building with the hospitals, schools and workplaces in which placements occur

About this report

Within this paper, we explore the issue of workplace learning within the context of the healthcare sector, specifically nursing. We examine the challenges that universities face when trying to place thousands of nurses into wards; and demonstrate how InPlace presents a powerful solution.

> Learning is increasingly taken off campus and immersed in disruptive work environments.

1   Swinburne Centre for the New Workforce, "Peak Human Potential: Preparing Australia's workforce for the digital future." https://www.swinburne.edu.au/media/swinburneeduau/centre-for-the-new-workforce/cnew-national-survey-report.pdf

2   Prof. Melanie Birks, Camilla Burkot, Tracy Bagley, Prof. Jane Mills, Dr Tanya Park, "The impact of clinical placement model on learning in nursing: A descriptive exploratory study." http://www.ajan.com.au/Vol34/Issue3/2Birks.pdf

The cost of manually managing student work experience

Using nursing as an example, it's clear that many universities struggle with the task of placing students in work experience.

Within a typical nursing school, placement managers must try to coordinate thousands of clinical placements every year, matching up individual students with their requisite clinical placements in aged care, paediatrics, theatre and more – across different wards and hospitals, and with different supervisors.

Without a centralised system for managing the process, these schools spend excessive time on the task. Five overarching issues emerge.

It's too complex

Working out which student nurses need to go where, and then working out which hospitals have spots available to suit the needs of each student, is complex.

Placement managers must liaise with health providers, students and university staff, trying to keep everyone happy. They must also tick off a huge number of tasks, from gathering student information and calculating placement demand to collating post-placement assessments and reports.

An inefficient process

Without a central system, placement managers set up their own spreadsheets and documents to keep track of clinical placements. Even within the same Faculty, different courses might manage things differently – be it Post it notes, spreadsheets or untraceable phone calls.

This approach is ad-hoc and inefficient, laborious and time-consuming. With no way to co-ordinate placements centrally across disciplines, the Faculty or university experiences a drain on productivity.

A lack of visibility

Using a manual system, universities lack real insights into the hospitals and facilities they are sending students to – which can have a negative effect on their relationship.

And, without the right data, it is very hard to optimise the match of students to placements based on things like distance to travel, pre-requisites or student requests – unless you spend a lot of time on the task.
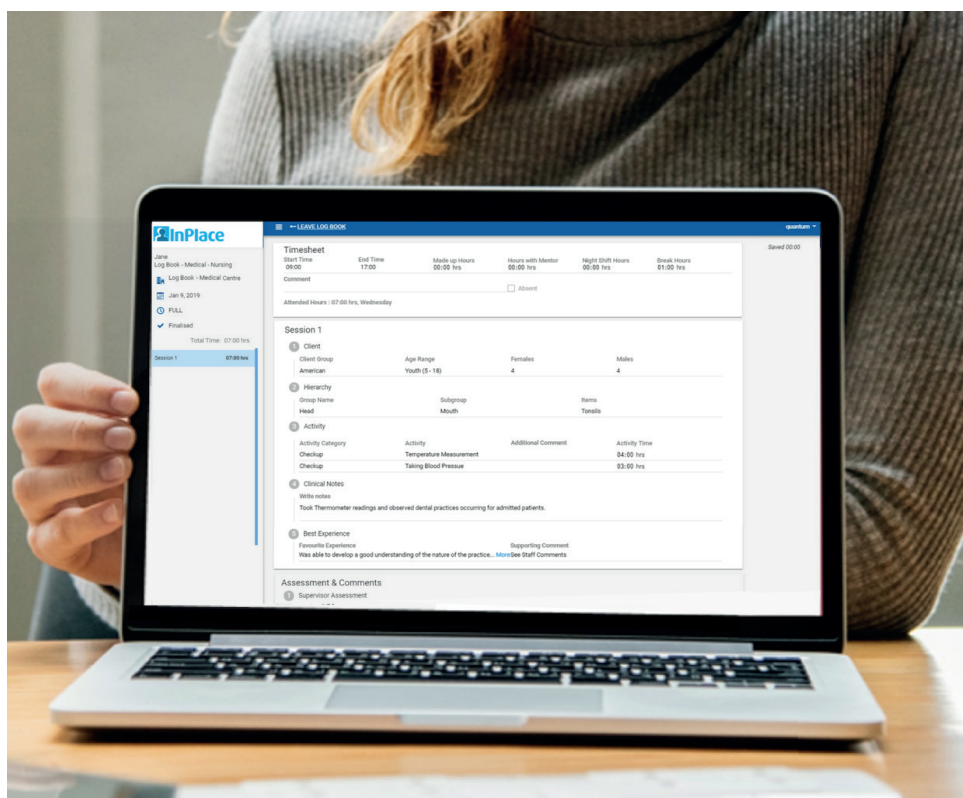
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Missing out on placements

In the face of increased competition amongst universities – where there are more students competing for fewer placements – manual systems can really slow a university down.

Placement managers may be slower to respond to offers, potentially causing students to miss out on the spot they want or need. This, in turn, is damaging to the university's reputation.

Negative impact on partnerships

If an education provider is trying to develop partnerships with organisations who offer student work placement opportunities, it's vital to ensure a consistently managed process so as not to frustrate those organisations.

For example, a university may send students from different courses – such as nursing and physiotherapy – to the same hospital. In many cases, staff from the different courses operate in silos; their uncoordinated approach has the potential to damage relationships with employer partners.

Conversely, if a centralised, coordinated approach is adopted, partnerships flourish. Plus, at the executive level, having access to a snapshot of all university-wide interactions with major employer partners is a valuable resource – which is near impossible to achieve without an integrated operational platform.

InPlace connects students to clinical placements

The platform is also a critical enabler of growth

Australian Catholic University (ACU) prides itself on being a university with a conscience, embedding empathy into every aspect of the learning environment. Its Faculty of Health Sciences is no exception, shaping students into citizens who improve the lives of others through the provision of world-leading health care.

Giving them real-life experience in the form of clinical placements is critical to students' growth, and ACU places immense value on this component of learning. In an increasingly competitive tertiary landscape, the ability to provide positive experiences in this area is also critical to the university's growth.

Just in time for rapid growth

InPlace was implemented at ACU in 2012, when there were 15,000 students. Since then, student numbers have doubled – there are now 31,000 students. Its nursing school is Australia's largest, with over 6,500 students and 12,000 clinical experiences per year across four cities.

"There is no way that our old practices – where we managed student placements one by one, with documentation flying every which way – could have coped with such rapid growth. We needed a system that would streamline our existing placement process and grow with us," said Patrick Player, Associate Director, Student Systems.

Previously, the university's placement managers would handle placements using ad-hoc, paper-based systems. There was no central record; gathering any type of statistical data was "horrendous".

To fix the problem and prepare the university for growth, ACU chose InPlace. It is used to not only handle all student placements in one central system, but also to:

- Generate reports for both government and partner institutions
- Offer opportunity-based placements and reporting
- Handle community engagements

The university has plans to use InPlace across more Faculties in the near future, and Incorporate more modules from the InPlace platform – such as the log book which students can complete and submit after a day's placement – to drive further value.

Students thrive with InPlace

ACU nursing students are actively engaging with InPlace. Before embarking on a placement, they can log in and check that they have all the documentation ready to go – things like immunisation records, police checks or working with children checks.

Then, when it's time to start a placement, students can check where they need to go on their first day, who to report to, and so on. This transparency instils confidence in the students and also helps them make a great first impression with hospital staff.

"The students love the opportunities module in InPlace – it's where they go to choose their own placement. For example, they may want to go to a hospital that's close to home. For our placement managers, it means that all student requests are housed in the one spot, instead of juggling emails from all over the place," said Player.

In 2018, across the whole university, there were 33,950 placements and 15,045 students placed in work experience positions.

InPlace gives ACU a competitive edge

The placement market is becoming increasingly competitive – universities are growing fast, yet the number of placement positions in hospitals isn't. Universities need to be at the top of their game if they want to give students the best opportunities when it comes to clinical experience.

ACU is certainly up there. In 2018, across the whole university, there were 33,950 placements and 15,045 students placed in work experience positions.

"InPlace helps us take up placements faster. Without it, we would struggle to assign all of our students to placements. Plus, it gives us an edge – we can match students to suitable placement opportunities before other universities take the spots," Player said.

InPlace also boosts ACU's reputation as a reliable, professional university to partner with. "It's important that the students we place are appropriate for the position and the hospital. InPlace has checks and balances to ensure this – which in turn ensures that we don't upset our hospital partners."

Using InPlace, all placement managers across ACU have the same access and can see if the university is getting close to its quota for a particular hospital. With most hospitals only allowing a certain number of placements, this visibility is not just useful, but important for maintaining those positive relationships with hospital partners.

A bright future at ACU

With enrolments doubling in the last five years, the future of the Faculty of Health Sciences at ACU is bright. Player and his team look forward to expanding the capacity of InPlace within the Faculty and introducing it to other faculties across the university so that more staff, students and partner institutions can realise the efficiencies that it delivers.

Grow your placement program, grow your reputation

To remain competitive when it comes to workplace learning, universities must replace ad-hoc approaches with a centralised clinical placement system. By doing so, you will enhance the student experience, boost your reputation and build stronger relationships with the institutions you are placing students in.

Why InPlace is the preferred choice

InPlace – the web-based solution that connects students to workplaces – transforms the way that universities manage placements. It provides a comprehensive end to end solution for managing all clinical placement requirements, saving universities huge amounts of time and money and providing a critical advantage in today's competitive environment.

Off the shelf, yet easily adaptable

With a flexible framework to meet the exact requirements of each education provider, InPlace can be used by small schools through to large universities, for short placements to longer ones. It integrates with most student record systems, providing a direct and automated link with student enrolments.

InPlace can easily be modified if, for example, you are expanding courses or adding new ones. In fact, it supports the evolution of your courses with its powerful predictive modelling – helping to design programs based on placement availability, so as to maximise learning opportunities.

A better student experience

With InPlace, students can access personalised work experience information from a 'mobile first' experience which automatically adjusts to their device. Hosted on Microsoft Azure, InPlace is accessible securely, any time, anywhere – convenient for students locally and/or for those doing international work experience.

From a single log-in, students can view all their current and planned work placement details; they can easily upload important documents like police checks or immunisation records; they can preference particular opportunities at hospitals close to home; they can submit online evaluations and keep a log book of their clinical experiences; they can even organise car pooling to work settings. All this, with complete confidence in the privacy of this sensitive data.

Boost to productivity

The automative smarts of InPlace significantly reduce the administrative burden, freeing up student services to pursue more strategic, value-added tasks. Academic staff and supervisors spend less time on admin, giving them more time to focus on enhancing the quality of the learning experience.

For example, at one university, the task of organising participants – including emails to all involved to book and reorganise placements – has been automated with InPlace to deliver time savings of up to 70%.

InPlace
Smart Placement Solutions

One InPlace customer has saved 289 days of administrative work each year in managing placements across all of its courses, an aggregate efficiency gain of 52%.

Using InPlace, they can respond faster and more accurately when managing placements – a win for the student, the hospitals and the university.

Invaluable feedback

All the evaluations and feedback coming back from a hospital, or even a ward, are stored centrally and digitally within InPlace. Universities can look at any placement provider's record in InPlace and see all historical and current placements, student feedback, associated personnel, incidents and more.

Armed with these insights, universities can look for trends about a hospital's performance as a placement provider, which in turn helps to develop a stronger program and better outcomes for students. Ultimately, it leads to enhanced quality of patient care.

Data at your fingertips

InPlace records vital information about each placement a student undertakes – including experience and duration, exact attendance details, supervision, mandatory training, fitness for practice referrals, theoretical achievements and more.

For supervisors, this ability to see at-a-glance where a student is at is vital to supporting their learning journey. It also helps to ensure that students are gaining all the necessary skills they need to be successful in the workplace.

InPlace and Microsoft Azure work tirelessly to ensure all data is hosted safely and securely, a working combination that complies with and exceeds the strict guidelines and data protection requirements mandated by institutes across the globe.

A more competitive footing

Ultimately, InPlace enables universities to get on the front foot with placements. Using InPlace, they can respond faster and more accurately when managing placements – a win for the student, the hospitals and the university.

Looking at this from the other side, without InPlace providing accurate matches between students and placement positions, there is a risk that the university could send students to inappropriate placements that they are perhaps not ready for. When this happens, hospitals may relegate the university to the bottom of the priority list, which increases the pressure on the placement sourcing process.

By overcoming all of the logistical and administrative challenges with a central, secure, automated system like InPlace, universities can transform the way that placements are managed. In the highly competitive higher education sector, such transformation is fundamental to long-term success.

InPlace, built by QuantumIT, is the market-leading clinical placement system used by higher education institutes worldwide.

InPlace is a complete placement solution, designed to support all placement models in tertiary education institutions with a highly automated, productivity focussed solution that is used by coordinators, academics, students and employers to collaborate online in the organisation of work placements for all disciplines and faculties.

It is unique in the market in being able to cater for the varying requirements of many disciplines in a single integrated database.

Oceania
Melbourne (Australia)
T: +613 8650 9800
100 Drummond Street
Carlton
VIC 3053

UK and Europe
London (United Kingdom)
T: +44 (0)207 0962152
Kemp House,
152-160 City Road,
London, EC1V 2NX

USA and Canada
Denver, Colorado (USA)
T: +1704 966 2100
2301 Blake Street
Denver,
CO, 80205

Asia & Middle East
Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia)
T: +60 173507677
Level 6,
UOA Corporate Tower
No 8, Jalan Kerinchi
Bangsar South 59200

InPlace
Smart Placement Solutions

team@inplacesoftware.com