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Accounting Students' Reflections on a Regional Internship Program

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Abstract

The opportunity to gain professional industry experience for accounting students while undertaking their undergraduate degree provides them with both a competitive edge in the marketplace and an opportunity to experience the activities undertaken in their chosen profession. Structured experiential learning programs provide students with the practical opportunity to apply their knowledge in an industry context and also to reflect on their personal learning journey. This paper explores the learning contribution of students' reflection-based assessments in an innovative and flexible internship program based on an e-learning framework. Through a preliminary investigation, it has been identified that after undertaking this internship program, accounting students from an Australian regional university have advanced their learning pertaining to workplace preparedness, understanding and application of accounting principles, generic skill enhancement, and consolidation of accounting as their chosen professional career. The paper suggests that an internship program such as the one examined contributes to the professional accountancy bodies' and community's expectations of accounting graduates possessing key cognitive and behavioural skills.

Keywords

Accounting students; Internship programs; Industry experience; Work related learning



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Abstract

The opportunity to gain professional industry experience for accounting students while undertaking their undergraduate degree provides them with both a competitive edge in the marketplace and an opportunity to experience the activities undertaken in their chosen profession. Structured experiential learning programs provide students with the practical opportunity to apply their knowledge in an industry context and also to reflect on their personal learning journey. This paper explores the learning contribution of students' reflection-based assessments in an innovative and flexible internship program based on an e-learning framework. Through a preliminary investigation, it has been identified that after undertaking this internship program, accounting students from an Australian regional university have advanced their learning pertaining to workplace preparedness, understanding and application of accounting principles, generic skill enhancement, and consolidation of accounting as their chosen professional career. The paper suggests that an internship program such as the one examined contributes to the professional accountancy bodies' and community's expectations of accounting graduates possessing key cognitive and behavioural skills.

Keywords: Accounting students; Internship programs; Industry experience; Work related learning.

JEL Classification: M40, R53, I23.

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1. A Different Way to Learn at University

The concept of undergraduate accounting students gaining professional practical experience while studying at university is not new (Teed & Bhattacharya 2002; Thrope-Dulgarian 2008; Ali, Heang, Mohamad & Ojo 2008): as far back as 1952 “the American Accounting Association (AAA) acknowledged the benefit of a period of practical experience incorporated into the academic preparation of an accountant” (Schmutte 1986, p227). One method used to provide professional practical experience is through internship programs where students have an opportunity to apply the theoretical knowledge gained through formal classroom learning in a structured environment (Swindle & Bailey 1984) which cannot be replicated in a normal class setting (Beard 1998; Beard 2007). In addition Beard identified a number of specific opportunities that an internship program could:

“integrate academic knowledge with practical applications, improve job/career opportunities after graduation, create relevance for past and future classroom learning, develop work place social and human relations skills, and provide the opportunity for students to apply communication and problem-solving skills” (Beard 1998, p515).

These benefits are consistent with Schmutte’s findings that students undertaking internship programs are able to better “clarify their career objectives before graduating and ... can provide students with additional input to allow better informed career decisions before their graduation” (1986, p228). Internship programs allow students to improve their career prospects (Teed & Bhattacharya 2002; Burnett 2003, Thorpe-Dulgarian 2008), take a deeper understanding of the discipline back to the classroom, and develop other profession-relevant skills such as communication and problem solving (Burnett 2003). Inherent in these benefits, – often not afforded the appropriate recognition – is the notion of learning how to learn in the workplace.

However, the benefits of internship programs are not just one-sided as there are also benefits to both the industry partner and the university delivering the program (Teed & Bhattacharya 2002; Burnett 2003). The industry partner benefits by having an opportunity to identify possible future employees, develop stronger links with the university coordinating the program and increase the organisation’s image in the community (Beard 1998; Beard 2007, Teed & Bhattacharya 2002; Burnett 2003). This last benefit is becoming increasingly important due to increased expectations in society of an organisation’s social responsibility. The university coordinating the internship program benefits in a number of different areas including strengthening relevance in the industry and with future students, identifying possible research partners and implementing curriculum improvements (Schmutte 1986; Beard 1998; Beard 2007; Burnett 2003).

Many accounting internships or work experience opportunities focus on the development of competencies, short-term professional incentives (such as gaining employment) and even an appreciation of lecturers’ experience (Herron & Morozzo 2008). However, traditional work oriented programs can limit the learning to focus on person-job fit. Because changes in the workforce and the demands of industry are ever increasing, higher education must ensure they prepare students to meet these challenges. Work-related learning (WRL), which includes internship programs, is a leading theoretical construct that emphasises the development of the graduate to better fit the changing economic situation and the evolving job market, and equip students to respond to wider societal developments (Moreland 2005). Successful WRL promotes learning across the lifespan (Moreland 2005) and utilises higher order metacognitive skills, such as judgement (Hager 2000) and reflection

(Brockbank, McGill & Beech 2002) for self-managed learning rather than curriculum-informed learning. Other work-oriented approaches include work-integrated learning (WIL) and work-based learning, both of which adopt a more vocational approach to work experience (Bohloko & Mahlomaholo 2008), and which can be specifically focused on academic learning outcomes (Moreland 2005) rather than learning which will specifically assist graduate professional development. The focus of WIL approaches on academic learning outcomes is supported by Reeders (2000, p5) who outlines that WIL includes “student learning for credit designed ... to emulate key aspects of the workplace”. A popular WIL approach used to simulate professional work activities in a classroom setting is authentic learning (Nicaise, Gibney & Crane 2000) where the aim is to “make the study of often abstract ideas or issues that can seem to be irrelevant to students’ daily lives tangible” (Borthwick et al. 2007, p15). As cited in Herrington, Oliver & Reeves (2003, p62) Jonassen (1991) “defined authentic activities as tasks that have real world relevance and utility, that integrate across the curriculum, that provide appropriate levels of complexity, and that allow students to select appropriate levels of difficulty or involvement”.

To structure an authentic learning activity there are a number of key characteristics the activity needs to have in order to achieve academic learning outcomes. Authentic learning activities have real world relevance and provide opportunities for students to examine scenarios from multiple perspectives, to collaborate with other students and to reflect (Herrington & Oliver 2000; Herrington, Oliver & Reeves 2003). The main benefit of an authentic learning activity is that it allows the students to participate in an activity which brings both learning and context together (Herrington & Oliver 2000) and which “help[s] students to become aware of the relevancy and meaningfulness of what they are learning [in the classroom] because the tasks mirror real-life experiences” (Nicaise, Gibney & Crane 2000, p80). Limitations of authentic learning include the “initial reluctance [of students] to willingly immerse in learning scenarios ... and the need for the suspension of disbelief before engaging in the task (Herrington, Oliver & Reeves 2003, p60). It is this ‘need for the suspension of disbelief’ which differentiates authentic learning from work-oriented approaches such as the internship program on which this study is based.

The primary research question to be addressed in this study is around the level of contribution that student reflective journals have in WRL based activities. That is, (to what extent) do reflective journal assessment tasks contribute to the learning of students undertaking a WRL activity? The context in which this research question is explored is an internship program developed and implemented in an Australian regional university for second and third year commerce students. One of the key objectives of an internship program is to provide students with an opportunity to experience the application of the knowledge learnt in a classroom within a professional setting (Teed & Bhattacharya 2002; Burnett 2003, Thorpe-Dulgarian 2008). Arguably the best method to evaluate the success of such a program is one where the participants reflect on their experiences, and by doing so they gain greater insights from these experiences (Boud, Keough, & Walker 1985). In addition to exploring the contribution of reflective journals this paper introduces a framework which supports the WRL learning approach in an undergraduate internship program.

To be prepared for the workforce “students need to develop their own repertoire of assessment-related practices that they will be able to use when confronted with learning challenges throughout their working lives” (Boud & Falchikov 2007, p5). Beyond the constructs of formal education, students need to engage in work and life as active learners, and “they have to determine what is to be learned, how it is to be learned and how to judge whether they have learned it or not” (Boud 2007, p18). The following section explores the role of reflection in assisting students to learn in and from their chosen profession.

2. Reflection and Learning

Reflection is the process where students “ponder, carefully and persistently” (Daudelin 1996, p39) their experiences to make sense of them in relation to “their current knowledge and beliefs” (Borthwick et al. 2007, p20). Boud supports this by suggesting that “reflection involves learners processing their experience in a wide range of ways, exploring their understanding of what they are doing, why they are doing it, and the impact it has on themselves and others” (1999, p123), and gaining “new understanding and appreciations” (Boud, Keough, & Walker 1985, p19). A practitioner may discover a new knowledge about themselves or their discipline by engaging in reflective activities – either formally, such as diarising, or informally, such as debriefing. Reflection, as a component of professional development, can be traced to the early works of Kolb (see Kolb 1984) and his principles on experiential learning, as well as through Dewey (1933), who was among the first to promote reflection as a means by which professionals can reflect on their experiences and act with foresight to plan for the future. Schön (1983) furthers this notion by describing two main forms of reflection used by professionals: ‘reflection-in-action’ and ‘reflection-on-action’. Much literature represents the connection between reflection and professional development (Hole & McEntee 1999; Zeichner & Liston 1996; Clark 1995; Osterman & Kottamp, 2004). Behaviours that may stimulate reflective practice include the mental processing of reflection (a critical element), self-development or professional development, emotional involvement, or the sharing of reflection with others (Moon 1999, p64).

While reflection is a process intrinsic to learning, which often occurs regardless of whether it is prompted (Boud 1999), in higher education assessing reflection through the written form (such as a journal) can be used to reinforce learning (Beck & Halim 2008) and to meet academic requirements. To achieve the most benefit from a reflective journal students reflect on both their experiences and the level of achievement of their personal objectives (Gray 2007). The use of reflective journals by students allows them to identify the links between theory and practice as well as providing them with an opportunity to identify “learning issues that require further discussion and development” (Gray 2007, p508). This opportunity also allows students to develop an appreciation and understanding of the rationale behind the processes that they learn in the classroom (Leung & Kember 2003, p69).

In the absence of teachers, subjects and assessment, students need to know how to learn and reflect on their workplace knowledge and skills (Boud & Falchikov 2006), both for professional growth and development, and also to adapt to an ever-changing workplace environment. This paper presents a unique internship program for commerce students, focusing on their learning beyond the classroom, and also examines what accounting students reveal they have learnt on reflection of their internship experience.

3. Research Context

The Commerce Internship Programme, developed and implemented at the University of Wollongong, a regional Australian university, offers a work-related learning model for enhancing student engagement in learning through practical experience. It embraces an innovative and flexible e-learning framework to foster learning through reflection-based assessments. Since its development and implementation in 2008, the program has competitively placed over 140 Commerce students in 35 regional and national organisations (as at early 2010). While student demand has risen, increasing the competitiveness of the program, industry participation has also increased over each session, which indicates the effectiveness of the model and the level of interest in student and community engagement.

The Commerce Internship Programme model is designed to meet the needs of its three key stakeholders: the student, the university and the industry partner. In the model, the student receives a valuable real-world learning opportunity to apply their discipline knowledge learnt at university in a dynamic professional environment offered by the industry partner. Driven by the key attributes of quality, flexibility and sustainability, the program consists of an intensive placement by competitive selection, and it is embedded in an undergraduate subject. It is open to second and third year students across commerce disciplines including accounting, finance, human resources, management, marketing and public relations. This paper is specifically interested in insights from accounting students.

Participation in the program mirrors the activity of a professional job application: students apply for roles based on their discipline by preparing and submitting a cover letter and resumé, through an online system specifically developed for the program. If shortlisted, the student is invited to attend a brief interview with a member of the industry partner organisation and an academic representative. Based on the role that they have identified, and student suitability, the industry partner makes the final decision on the selection of the student for the placement.

Successful students are subsequently enrolled in the program and spend a total of 16 days working with the industry partner during the academic session. The 16 days are spread over eight weeks, in two-day blocks, or by negotiation between the student and industry partner, and are completed concurrently with other subjects in which the student is enrolled. Students participate in projects or perform specific roles as agreed with the industry partner, and these are designed to challenge and develop the intern to undertake real-work tasks that contribute to the organisation. This is in contrast to typical traditional internships, where the focus can be on general clerical duties (Swindle & Bailey 1984).

In addition to the work placement, the program is embedded in a third year elective subject and uses a combination of face-to-face and online mediums to prepare and assess students. The structure of the program and its specific assessments are a means for students to 'learn how to learn' in the workplace. All assessments are submitted online through an e-learning forum, allowing students the flexibility to be away from the campus, and to provide more timely feedback. Assessments include completing a daily e-log and answering specific questions contained in modules covering the workplace environment, teamwork, creative and critical thinking, and a reflective journal. Assessments are graded on a qualitative measurement of satisfactory or unsatisfactory, as used by other internship programs (Beard 2007). Students' assessments are reviewed and critiqued by the academic coordinators of the program, who are experienced in learning inquiry approaches and reflection principles. The course is designed to aid student development and help them make changes to enhance their learning, practice and contribution to the organisation (Boud & Costley 2007).

The daily e-log completed by each intern for each of the 16 days serves several purposes. Firstly, it affords the student a mechanism to self-evaluate their role and capabilities, and while being a historical document of their activities, it also offers daily learning and enlightenment that recognises deeper learning and supports the final reflective piece. For the coordinators of the program, the daily e-log plays a significant role as a formative piece of assessment, in which feedback on their learning journey and reflection techniques can be offered and directed. The daily e-log allows coordinators to monitor a student's role in the workplace and to intervene if deemed necessary (Boud & Costley 2007). The general modules focus on aspects of the workplace that can enhance students' awareness of their position, what is happening around them and how they contribute to this dynamic. In each module a case study and e-reading are provided for the students to read and integrate in response to the specific set questions.

The final assessment task is a reflective journal which aims to capture the student's final thoughts and insights, leading to an awareness of workplace learning, which is the focus of this paper. While the e-logs asked students to 'reflect-in-action', the reflective journal represents the act of taking a step back and 'reflect-on-action' to identify and draw meaning from the experience and to generate new understandings (Schön 1983). Students are provided with prompts in a journal template which includes six questions designed to direct their thoughts to their transferability of skills, knowledge, strengths and weaknesses, learning styles and to how the internship experience may affect their future. This approach is consistent with Borthwick et al. (2007) who found that "a pattern of journal writing is established with guiding questions so that the reflections are directed to specific aspects of content to encourage subjective engagement, not just regurgitation of content" (p20).

4. Method

This study undertook descriptive research in a preliminary investigation into the reflective learning insights of two cohorts of accounting students who participated in the Commerce Internship Programme. It was expected that these insights would provide a greater level of understanding of accounting students' perceptions and learning in the program as well as add value and feedback on the structure and delivery of the internship program. Descriptive research was selected (a method common in commerce research), to ascertain the characteristics of the sample (Sekaran 2000). The goal of this investigation was to present the data in a meaningful way, to make connections (Churchill & Iacobucci 2005), and to probe and research ideas in further studies.

This paper focuses on the sixteen students from the disciplines of accounting and finance who participated in the internship program in the autumn and spring sessions of 2009. Data was collected from the reflective journals of these sixteen students due to its usefulness in gathering rich self-reported insights into the students' learning experiences (Smith et al. 2007) and into the underlying dimensions of work practices (Clegg 2000).

The data was initially analysed using rudimentary content analysis to determine the relationship between word count and the student variables of age, gender and weighted average mark. This rudimentary content analysis allows the researcher to identify any basic trends or relationships without progressing down the path of using descriptive statistical analysis. The intent was to describe and summarise the data and its variables – not to determine a cause-and-effect relationship. The expected results of this analysis would reveal the degree to which students engaged with the six specific questions and any patterns which emerged in the variables. The first question in the reflective journal required students to outline the organisational structure of the industry partner and describe the activities they undertook while on placement. This question did not require students to reflect on their learning and as a result was excluded from the content analysis.

The next method used to examine the data was thematic analysis where the students' responses to Questions 2 through to 6 in the reflective journals were analysed to identify common themes amongst students in their internship learning experiences. The parameters of the analysis were set to separate the individual reflective journal questions and then to code the responses to each question across the dataset for themes, key terms, expressions and phrases. This technique, known as "open coding" (Strauss & Corbin 1998, p32), has been employed in the analysis of open-ended questionnaires to reveal common themes (Yanamandram & Noble 2005). The dataset in this initial study was individually coded to minimise the risk of overlooking important concepts. The codes were then compared collectively and interpreted to identify any shared learning insights.

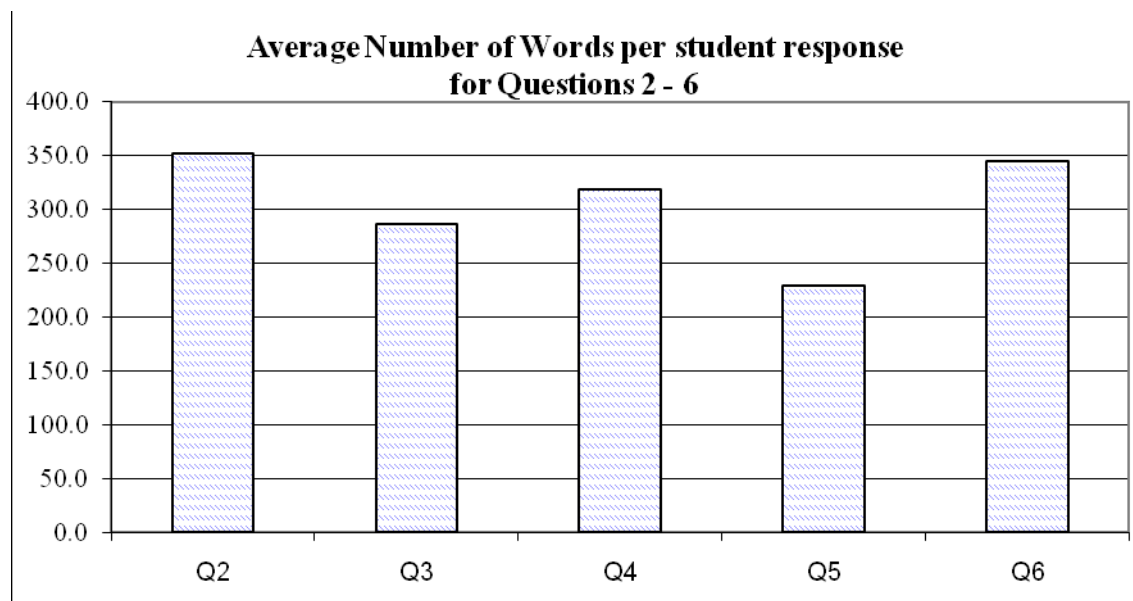
Student Profile

The profiles of the participating students were based on basic descriptive characteristics including gender, age and academic performance. Of the sixteen students, seven (44%) were female, and nine (56%) were male. The academic performance of the students was assessed by calculating the weighted average mark (WAM) of all subjects completed by each student in their degree. In the study, one student's WAM was equivalent to a high distinction (>84%), four students' WAM was equivalent to a distinction (>74%), nine a credit (>64%), and two a pass (<65%). This spread of marks indicates that the accounting and finance students selected to participate in the internship program weren't necessarily the most academically gifted. The age range of the students was 17 years, with the youngest being 20 years of age and the oldest being 37 years of age. Four students (25%) were classified as mature-age (older than 25 years), while the other twelve students were classified as non-mature age students. The final characteristic identified was whether the student was participating in the internship program during the last session of their degree. Of the sixteen students, eight (50%) were in the last session of their degree while the other eight (50%) still had one or more sessions remaining at university to complete their degree.

The students undertook their placements in a range of organisations, including professional public accounting firms, international private sector organisations, small local private sector organisations, public sector organisations (local governments) and not-for-profit organisations. It is important to note that, except for one organisation, all industry partners were regionally based. Although four students participated in the same firm, they performed different roles and were located in different areas of the organisation. The following section discusses the analysis of the reflective journals each student prepared and submitted after they completed their internship placement.

5. Data Analysis

Figure 1
Average Number of Words per Student Response



Rudimentary content analysis was conducted to determine the number of words used by the students to answer Questions 2 through to 6, in the reflective journal and the frequency distribution in percentages across the five questions. Question 1 was excluded from this analysis as it was descriptive in nature rather than reflective, and required mostly diagrams and graphs to present the organisational structure. For each analysis, the results are grouped and compared on two variables: age and gender. This component of the study is for descriptive and directional purposes only and as such no specific inferences are drawn. The use of this method allowed the researchers to identify areas which may warrant more in-depth investigation when undertaking the thematic analysis component of the study.

Figure 1 (above) graphically represents the average number of words that students used to respond to Questions 2–6. Interestingly, the responses to Question 5 exhibit a considerable drop in average words in comparison. Question 5 required the students to reflect on how they might change their learning style based on their learning experience in industry. Deeper examination into the responses to this question are shown later in this paper in the section Insights from Reflective Journals.

When reviewing the average number of words for Questions 2–6, divided into the two subgroups based on the age and gender variables, a number of differences in the group of students becomes evident. Table 1 (below) shows that male students on average used 14% fewer words in responding to Questions 2–6 compared to female students. The largest variation in the number of words used between the students grouped by gender was in response to Question 3 (40%), which concerned students identifying specific skills that they began to develop during their placement. The only question where the male students' average number of words was greater than that of the female students was in response to Question 4, where students were asked to identify what they learnt from a personal perspective during the internship placement, including strengths and areas in need of improvement.

Table 1
Average Number of Words per Student Response based on Gender

	Females	Males	Var %
Q2	401.3	313.6	28
Q3	342.4	244.2	40
Q4	284.1	345.7	-18
Q5	266.9	200.3	33
Q6	348.1	342.7	2
Total	1642.9	1446.4	14

The largest variance in the gender groupings was found in Question 4, where the male students devoted a larger component of their reflective journal than the female students.

Regarding age groupings (refer Table 2 below), the largest variance was in relation to Question 3, where mature-age students devoted a significantly smaller component of their reflective journal than the non-mature age students.

Table 2
Average Number of Words per Student Response based on Age

	Non-Mature Age	Mature age	Var %
Q2	377.3	276.0	37
Q3	325.8	171.3	90
Q4	331.8	279.5	19
Q5	241.0	194.8	24
Q6	368.3	275.3	34
Total	1644.3	1196.8	37

The following two charts, Figure 2 and Figure 3, show the proportion of the students' reflective journals devoted to Questions 2–6.

Figure 2
Content Proportions shown as a Percentage based on Gender

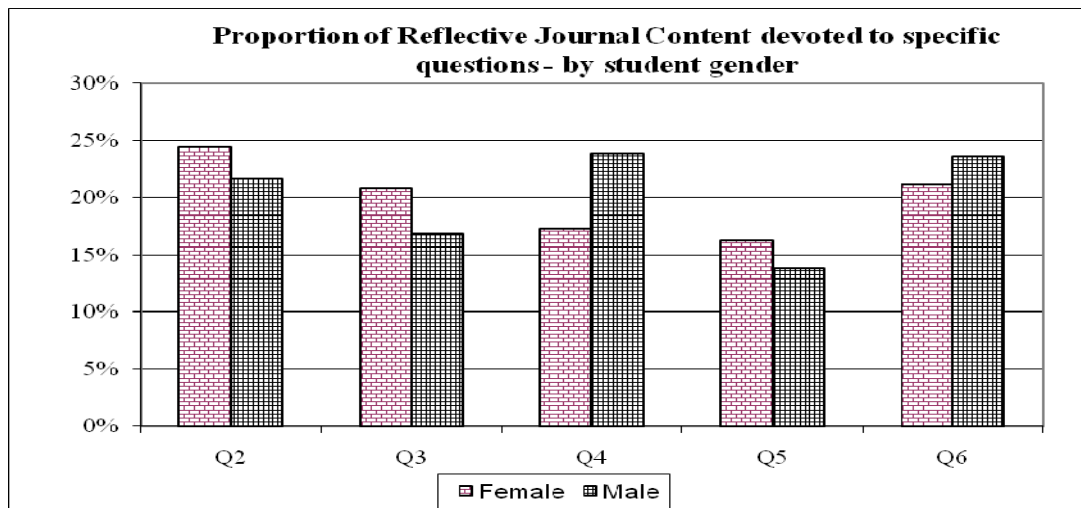
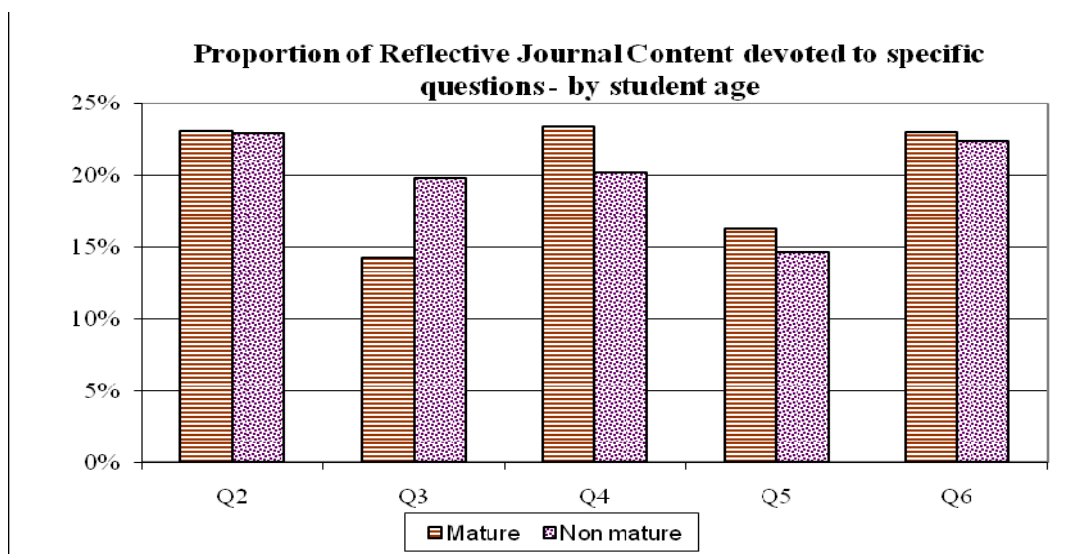


Figure 3
Content Proportions shown as a Percentage based on Mature and Non-mature Aged Students



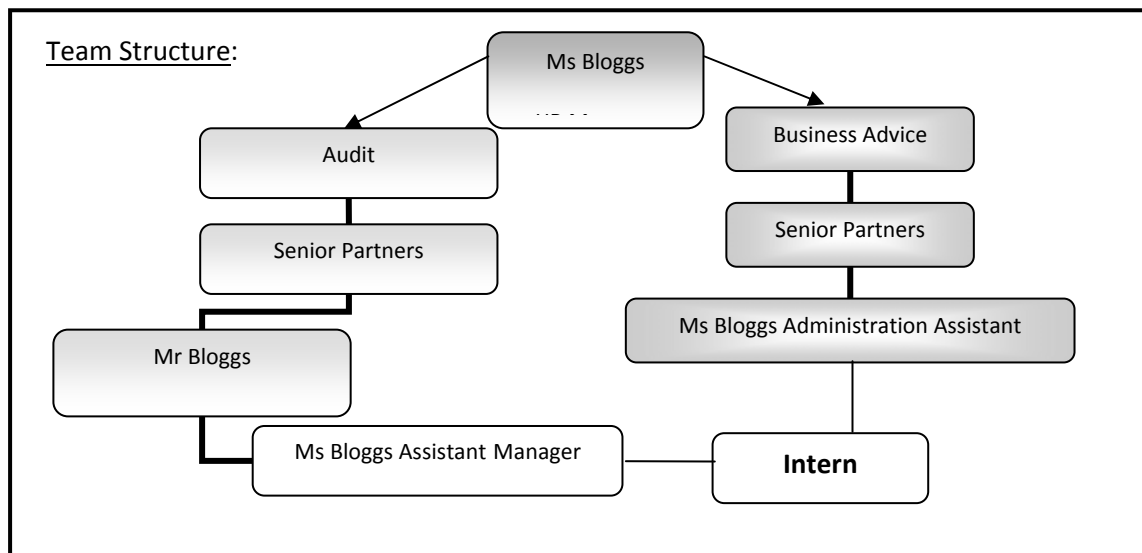
6. Insights From Reflective Journals

The reflective journal assessment task required students to address six open-ended questions with the objective of encouraging “subjective engagement, not just regurgitation of content” (Borthwick et al. 2007, p20) so as to provide an opportunity for the students to engage in deeper learning. The instructions directed students to draw on what they experienced during their time on work placement to reflect on their learning. The following section discusses each of the specific areas covered in the six questions and includes a qualitative review of the students’ responses and learning from which themes are identified and discussed.

Organisation and Role Context

Question 1 required each student to provide an overview of the organisation and identify the key tasks and roles that they participated in during their placement. In addressing this question, students could use a combination of text, diagrams, tables and pictures. Most students (62%) used a combination of diagrams, charts and text to overview the organisation where they undertook the internship program. Several students explicitly included themselves in the diagram, which indicates their ability to place themselves in the context of their role in the organisation. Figure 4 illustrates one student’s conception of how they saw themselves fitting into the team structure (Student 11).

Figure 4
Student's Conceptual Diagram of Role in Organisation while on Placement



The types of roles the interns participated in varied, and was quite broad in the business context. Several students identified that they had participated in specific accounting roles and performed tasks often associated with accountancy, such as bank reconciliations, processing accounts payable, preparation of trial balances and cash flow statements. Some of the interns participated in more project-based roles where they were required to research a specific topic, collect information and present their findings to colleagues within the organisation. For example, one student undertook a project based on developing a response to an external

legislative review of the organisation's financial operations; another student undertook a review of the policies and procedures of the organisation's purchasing and cost control department. These roles allowed students to place accountancy and associated tasks in a broad industry perspective. That is, they learnt that accounting is more than it is perceived to be, and one student stated: "The underlying assumption with most accounting jobs from individual's perspective is that it's virtually all number crunching, however... within public practice the roles are quite diverse ... [as in] the particular roles I've done within the organisation" (Student 1).

While 10 students expressed excitement and embraced their role, six students (38%) indicated some level of dissatisfaction with the tasks allocated to them. These students commented that they viewed their role as either relatively simple (such as data entry) or, as one student identified, they felt that their rather routine role allowed full-time employees to "complete interesting but less important projects that have been temporarily shelved" (Morrow 1995, in Beck & Halim 2008, p152). Regardless of their (dis)satisfaction with their roles, most of these students indicated that they had an understanding of why they were allocated these tasks. One student recalled: "I would have liked however to have a more active role ... but as there are many security risks with millions of dollars ... it is understandable that I had to take a more passive role" (Student 13).

Application of Knowledge

Question 2 in the reflective journal required each student to outline the skills developed during their university studies which they applied during their internship placement. Surprisingly, most students discussed how they were required to undertake tasks drawing on principles and techniques they learnt in their first-year accounting subjects degree, ACCY100 (Accounting 1A) and ACCY102 (Accounting 1B). These tasks included completing reconciliations (accounts and bank statements), income statement and balance sheet analysis, and completing and posting journals. These subjects, ACCY100 and ACCY102, are core commerce subjects; that is, those which all commerce students, regardless of discipline, are required to complete. Several students included in their discussion the application of processes they learnt in the latter part of their degrees, including auditing techniques to assess internal control risk and the application of tax laws for the preparation of individual income tax returns and the calculation of Fringe Benefits Tax. For example, one student wrote: "I was able to actually perform tests of controls, where I was responsible for checking that [sic] proper authorisation ... and as a result appreciate why this is done" (Student 11). This suggests that this student may have had some doubt or miscomprehension prior to the internship, which translated into their revelations of ability, responsibility and understanding.

In addition to skills learnt in specific university subjects, the students' responses to Question 2 also included various generic skills taken from university and applied in the workplace. Among these, the skills most often discussed were time management and teamwork. The following statement from one student outlines their appreciation of the importance of the skill involved with working in teams: "I soon realised it was a different matter, as university assessments don't usually require much collaboration between group members, whereas in a work environment the success and failure of the organisation itself depends on members working together" (Student 2).

The level of application of skills learnt during university study in the internship placement was succinctly outlined by one student: "...it was surprising how much I did actually know and how applicable some of it was" (Student 12). This statement is evidence of an increasing awareness and confidence in students' university preparation.

Skills Developed

Question 3 required each student to identify specific skills they developed during their placement. Key specific skills that students identified included analytical skills, critical thinking skills, communication skills, teamwork skills, technical skills, attention to detail and meeting deadlines. The most common skill explicitly identified was communication skills. This reflects the key component of the accounting profession – communication – without which all accounting techniques and processes would be rendered meaningless.

The next-most prevalent skill discussed was teamwork. Many students identified that without teamwork and collaboration with their colleagues in the organisations, they would not have been successful in completing their assigned tasks. Initially, some students indicated they were uncomfortable working in teams, and preferred to work on their own. However, soon after starting the program they discovered they did not always have the luxury of time to work individually. One student stated succinctly: “the team experience in a professional setting was quite different [from university]... I was not able to complete a team project by myself as this was not only too broad and difficult, but it required specific knowledge which was beyond my grasp and expertise” (Student 2).

Critical thinking was also a key skill which many of the students identified as having developed or improved during their internship placement. Critical thinking is particularly important for accounting students to develop, because it indicates an ability to move away from the standard process-driven techniques of accounting to the more subjective, interpretive approach to accounting. The creative thinking ability of the students reflects an increased ability to solve problems, provide solutions to business dilemmas and add greater value to the organisations within which they work.

Personal Perspective

Question 4 required each student to identify what they had learnt from a personal perspective during the internship placement, including the possible identification of strengths and areas in need of improvement. In addressing this question, the most common strength requiring the most attention was communication. Several students suggested their communication skills were their strength, which either became evident to them during their placement, or which they were already aware of and could put into practice. Other students identified communication skills as an area of weakness, which they thought was improved by participating in the internship program. Irrespective of whether a student thought their communication skills were a strength or a weakness, all believed that their communication skills was an area that they could improve. This self-awareness is an indication of deep reflection – being able to evaluate one’s character and see how to modify it for future experiences.

Another common area identified as either a strength or weakness was the students’ skills in working in a team environment. Where a student identified this area as a weakness, the student was generally quite specific, for example: “an area in need of improvement is the need to be able to accept that I have to rely on other members of the team” (Student 2). In contrast, if a student identified this area as a strength, they focused more on their ability to *get along* with others, rather than specifically *to work* with others. For example, one student stated: “I believe my major strength... was my ability to get on well with my fellow employees” (Student 13).

Most students also identified specific processes or tasks which they believed were representative of their strengths or weaknesses. These specific tasks included the use of accounting software, problem identification, organisational skills and having an eye for

detail. When a student identified a weakness – in all instances – they expressed clearly that this was an area which they needed to improve, and the path to improvement started during the internship placement.

Review and Modification of Learning Style

Question 5 required each student to reflect on how they might change their learning style based on their learning experience in industry. This question was answered particularly poorly by most students in terms of effort, language and degree of reflection. Perhaps this question was seen as a throwaway response, to which little attention was needed. With greater time and effort, and preparation from the program, the realisation of the importance of this question may become apparent.

Although the number of words was low overall in this question, the language used demands discussion. In many cases sentences were incomplete, typos abounded and several submissions did not make sense. Few students borrowed terms used in the modules in their responses. These issues imply rather surface-level reflections on the students' learning styles, even though one student did show signs of deeper reflection: "how I have learned increases my self-awareness about my strengths and weaknesses as a learner, so that I will be able to try the various means of learning, rather [than] sticking to my preferences" (Student 16).

In contrast to the other responses, one student disclosed their preference for working autonomously, stating that it gave them time to think carefully and understand the problem, even though they recognised the impact this might have had on employers and productivity. The student concluded by describing their need to work on being flexible and seeing the bigger picture. These comments represent signs of deep reflection as the student unpacks an awareness of their learning and practice style.

Although the degree of reflection in the above case appeared to be a veneer, and more so than for the responses for the other questions, several common themes emerged in the students' answers. One of the themes arising from the students' responses to this question relates to understanding. Six students (38%) explicitly outlined that they would place more emphasis on understanding the concepts taught. For example, one student wrote: "I have learned that it is important to understand why I am being taught what I am" (Student 15). Another stated: "I have realised that it's not the grades that matters most but being able to understand what you are taught and apply it in real life" (Student 7). This illustrates a growing comprehension and appreciation for academic studies. The application of theoretical concepts was further acknowledged as was the general premise that 'learning through doing' was an enjoyable learning style.

Surprisingly, a theme which did not rate highly among the students was the importance of network building. This theme was initially anticipated by the authors as one that most students should identify as a tool for improving learning styles. However, this was not evident from the students' responses to this question.

Overall Experience

The last question, Question 6, asked the students to reflect on their overall experience and discuss how it might inform their future university studies or the progression into their chosen career. The question specifically asked the student to relate their experiences to their future education and professional life. With some exceptions, most students did not adequately address this question in reflecting on their experience. There were two aspects to this problem. First, many students made vague or ambiguous responses without exploring why they felt or thought about something in a particular way. For example, 10 students (63%)

stated that the experience was a positive and/or enjoyable experience, but these responses were not backed up by evidence nor by any examples from the workplace. Second, few students personalised their responses, instead using third person analogies and sweeping statements or generalisations that resulted in difficulty assessing the learning that had occurred.

Those students who were the exceptions reflected deeply on their experience and gave examples to describe their thoughts and feelings. A level of self-awareness is realised as the new information is transformed into direction for future study and career decisions. This was reflected in 25% of all students, who outlined an increased level of motivation for their university studies. Also interesting, was the 50% of students in the program who explained that they could apply theory learnt during their studies in the workplace, and appreciated the importance and relevance of what they were learning at university with their chosen profession.

Ten students (63%) confirmed that this internship program provided reassurance in their choice of profession. For example: “not only has my overall experience reinforced that I have chosen the right career path, but it has also provided me an opportunity to see how well I would fit into the public sector” (Student 2). The program also provided increased incentive for their studies: “by knowing that this is the course for me I am more motivated to work harder and achieve higher” (Student 3).

7. Discussion of Findings

Reflective learning is not new to the accounting discipline. However, the results identified in this paper demonstrate that reflection in an internship experience has enabled accounting students to gain another perspective in regard to their competency levels in the accounting profession and the development of much-needed general skills – such as analytical, critical thinking, communication, teamwork, technical, attention to detail and meeting deadlines.

Few students in this study showed signs of deep reflection. However, it was observed that the degree of reflection was not equal across questions. Although the assessment is more concerned with the student making connections through their learning, this research has demonstrated the effectiveness of using reflective techniques to re-evaluate and reconsider program improvement in the preparation of students for their placement in the future of the program as it evolves.

The most prominent skill explicitly identified was that of communication skills, followed by teamwork skills. Students noted key differences about working in a group environment within a university setting compared to the demands of team performance in the workplace setting. The students’ ability to reflect on their experiences was useful in their understanding and personal development of how they could adjust their perception of participation. One student recognised that: “an area in need of improvement is the need to be able to accept that I have to rely on other members of the team”; whereas if a student identified this area as a strength, they focused more on their ability to get on with others, rather than specifically work with others. The development of generic workplace skills supports higher education’s engagement in internship programs, as Australian professional accounting bodies expect graduates to display cognitive and behaviour skills such as personal skills, appreciation skills and interpersonal skills (Certified Practising Accountants and Institute of Chartered Accountants in Australia, 1996).

The findings from this study reveal that most students (63%) found answers to questions about their preparation for the workforce and career choice. For undergraduate students, the decision to become an accountant is often made with limited knowledge and experience of the profession (Herron & Morozzo 2008). This program offers a pathway for

students to explore the profession while in a supportive environment to self-assess their aptitude and motivation towards the career. This knowledge before entering the workforce is beneficial to the student as it helps ground their perception of the industry and motivate their study with a sense of purpose.

When students were asked how their learnt knowledge had benefited their learning in the workplace, it was found that there was a reassurance that the teaching base in first and second year subjects provides the core of applied material for the workplace. This was identified through core tasks which students completed, such as reconciliations and posting journals. Another positive discovery was the revelation of why they are taught certain concepts at university and asked to complete specific assignments. Seeing how knowledge is unpacked in industry placement scenarios enhances their ability to make the connection of how university taught knowledge works in the business world.

Not every experience met the students' expectations. For example, one student noted they felt their role was based on the less-important tasks that staff of the organisation were unable or unwilling to complete themselves. Nevertheless, most students indicated that they had an understanding of why they were allocated various activities. A grounded perspective of reality in most organisations enabled these students to gain an insight of what might lie ahead in the early years after graduation. This includes the students' self-recognition that progression requires time and experience in the role and organisation.

After the placement experience, students indicated that they were starting to make judgements about their own work. Boud and Falchikov (2006, p402) state that, in order to prepare students for the implications of the workforce, higher education providers need to support students in making complex decisions regarding their personal contributions and the work of others "in the uncertain and unpredictable circumstances in which they will find themselves in the future" (Student 3).

In addition to the review of reflective journals the study also examined the profiles, including the WAM, of each of the participating students to determine whether or not their academic performance increased after their internship. Of the sixteen accounting students in the study eight of them were undertaking the internship in the last session of their university degree. The WAM of the other eight over the next few sessions of their degree did not show any indication that the internship contributed to improved grades (see Table 3 below).

Table 3
Change in Weighted Average Marks after Participating in Internship Programme

M/F	Age '09	WAM	Post WAM	Grade Change
Female	21	80	78	Decrease
Female	37	77	84	Increase
Female	22	72	63	Decrease
Female	23	70	67	Decrease
Male	23	85	94	Increase
Male	21	74	75	Increase
Male	21	70	70	Constant
Male	23	69	84	Increase

Four students' WAMs increased, three decreased, and one remained the same as before they undertook the internship. These results are consistent with Knechel and Snowball's (1987) findings that there is little evidence of improved academic performance after undertaking an internship program. This would suggest that the objectives of commerce internship programs should not focus on improved academic performance of students nor should the effectiveness of internship programs be based on improved academic performance. Rather the program should be seen as an opportunity to provide students with professional practical experience.

8. Conclusion

This paper began by discussing work-related learning (WRL) which, unlike other work experience constructs, places emphasis on the development of the graduate for immersion into industry, society and the world. WRL activities promote lifelong learning by preparing students for the challenges of the workforce through focusing on their learning and development through practice and reflection. The results presented in this paper further provide support for programs, such as the University of Wollongong's Commerce Internship Programme, which enhance the transition of students into industry while requiring students to reflect on their experience. It is this reflective experience which unpacks the learning that students encounter, and although it is acknowledged that more can be done to better prepare the student (including perhaps greater education on reflective techniques), this discussion illustrates that students are not just learning competencies but 'softer skills' such as self-awareness, and cognitive and behavioural skills. It is suggested that work-oriented programs include reflection and assessment tools beyond competency development to best equip students for the changing economic environment, the evolving job market and the challenges beyond the institution.

The reflective strategies and learning outcomes identified in this paper may also resonate with different disciplines both within and external to commerce, which may themselves benefit from the consideration of these issues. In the interests of providing a more robust cross-commerce understanding, further research may take into consideration a comparison of cross-discipline students undertaking the program as well as the learning effects of work placements. Understanding these effects would provide information on how to enhance higher education's ability to improve their support for students' learning and development through experiential learning programs.

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