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# Learner perspectives on online assessments as a mechanism to engage in reflective practice

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## Publication Details

Sheridan, L., Kotevski, S. & Dean, B. A. (2014). Learner perspectives on online assessments as a mechanism to engage in reflective practice. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 15 (4), 335-345.

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## **Abstract**

Reflective practice is an important lifelong skill for business professionals. In the work integrated learning (WIL) curriculum, supporting interns' development of reflective practice is critical to their experience in WIL as well as their transition into professional practice. The purpose of this paper is to explore students' perceptions on the use of online assessments for engagement in reflective practice as they undertake internships as part of WIL. The findings demonstrate online assessment as commensurate with facilitating reflection-on-action. Students report on the benefits of the online environment for enabling accessible and flexible engagement with assessments. The online assessments are endorsed as critical learning opportunities for students to iteratively look back on their actions to consider or record improvements as well as to 'practise reflective practice'. Although few students found online reflective assessments constrained social learning, we argue that a balance between face-to-face and online learning is essential to supporting learners in dispersed contexts in WIL.

## **Keywords**

engage, reflective, mechanism, practice, assessments, online, perspectives, learner

## **Disciplines**

Business

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# Learner perspectives on online assessments as a mechanism to engage in reflective practice

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Reflective practice is an important lifelong skill for business professionals. In the work integrated learning (WIL) curriculum, supporting interns' development of reflective practice is critical to their experience in WIL as well as their transition into professional practice. The purpose of this paper is to explore students' perceptions on the use of online assessments for engagement in reflective practice as they undertake internships as part of WIL. The findings demonstrate online assessment as commensurate with facilitating reflection-on-action. Students report on the benefits of the online environment for enabling accessible and flexible engagement with assessments. The online assessments are endorsed as critical learning opportunities for students to iteratively look back on their actions to consider or record improvements as well as to 'practise reflective practice'. Although few students found online reflective assessments constrained social learning, we argue that a balance between face-to-face and online learning is essential to supporting learners in dispersed contexts in WIL. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 2014, 15(4), 335-345)

Keywords: Work-integrated learning, online learning, online assessment, reflective practice, business education

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In the work integrated learning (WIL) curriculum, assessments are widely used to support students' reflection on activities in the workplace. Literature in WIL and related workplace learning domains, broadly promote some form of reflection through which students make connections between canonical or discipline knowledge and applications to practice (Patrick et al., 2008). Through such reflections students' awareness grows in broad areas of academic knowledge, skill development and lifelong learning (Harvey, Coulson, Mackaway, & Winchester-Seeto, 2010).

Various studies exploring reflection in WIL offer compelling arguments for its contribution to student learning. Reflection has been examined from theoretical perspectives, such as ways to model and embed reflection in curriculum (Harvey et al., 2010), assessment perspectives, including discussion on whether to structure reflective or probing questions (Dean, Sykes, Agostinho, & Clements, 2012), as well as design perspectives, for example the utility of reflection in the online space (Woodley & Beattie, 2011). In addition, reflection has also been examined from the student perspective, for example, through analyzing reflective assessment tasks to thematically investigate *what* students are learning in the workplace (Cord & Clements, 2010; Hughes, Mylonas, & Benckendorff, 2013). Despite the prevalence and endorsement of reflection in WIL, what appears to be missing is an understanding of *how* students engage in reflective practice, that is, their perceptions on the efficacy of the reflective mechanism itself.

The purpose of this paper is to explore learners' perceptions on the use of online assessments for engagement in reflective practice. To do so, we surveyed students who had participated in an internship program as part of a Bachelor of Commerce degree, at the University of Wollongong. These students had partaken in reflective practice multiple times throughout the duration of their placements in assessments supported by an online learning platform.

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To explicate the characteristics of reflective practice in WIL and position the research undertaken, this paper is structured as follows. First, an overview of WIL and several distinctions, characteristics and uses of reflection for learning are unpacked. Second, a brief examination of online assessments in WIL is offered. Third, the context of the study including the WIL internship program and assessments are presented. Fourth, the methodology and details of the research are sketched. Fifth, the findings are presented and discussed before concluding with some considerations for WIL assessors and practitioners.

## REFLECTIONS ON REFLECTION IN WIL

In Australia, work integrated learning (WIL) is the widely accepted term for activities and programs for learning through work (Patrick et al., 2008; Orrell, 2011). It has been described as an 'umbrella concept' for "a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum" (Patrick et al., 2008, p. iv). It can encompass a spectrum of activities, from one-off classroom based simulations or guest speakers to more long-term programs where time is spent in the workplace on placement, internship or practicum. To account for the diversity of interests and approaches, Orrell (2011) refers to WIL as a 'field of practice'. One point of commonality among the various definitions and approaches to WIL is the significance of the "purposefully designed curriculum" (Patrick et al., 2008) to optimize student learning.

When students spend time in workplaces, through internships for example, the WIL curriculum very readily includes some form of reflection. Reflection is a broad term that requires clarification on its meaning and scope. Schön's (1983; 1987) seminal work with practitioners, describes professional's knowing-in-action through distinguishing two types of reflection: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection in-action and on-action are constituents of reflective practice, where reflection-in-action is designated to immediate bodily responses in the instance of surprise, and reflection-on-action is characterized as a mental process of pausing to contemplate an action.

Reflection-in-action is significantly entangled with professional practices as well as professional 'artistry' (Schön, 1987). Only a handful of studies have explored reflection-in-action in the domain of WIL, through authentic placement experiences. Stockhausen (2005) is one such study that found that supervisors for clinical placements enacted 'Métier Artistry' an unnoticed reflection-in-action whereby experienced nurses moved seamlessly between assessing patients and teaching intern nurses. In another study, Sykes and Dean (2013) demonstrated the limitations of pedagogically structured WIL assessments to capture reflection-in-action, determining it would be better termed reflection-in-the-midst-of-action. Their study shows that WIL assessments that are iterative and completed immediately after practice are closer to the action for reflective processes, yet are indeed processes of reflection-on-action.

Reflection-on-action within a WIL curriculum, gives students an opportunity to evaluate their actions in the workplace. Reflection-on-action encourages students to "think about various concepts, events, or interactions over a period of time for the purposes of gaining insights into self-awareness and learning" (Thorpe, 2004, p. 328). It engages students in a process of meaning-making that is essential to lifelong learning (Cord et al., 2010). As students think about what they did in the workplace, they become "self-aware and able to constructively prepare, evaluate and improve their own practice" (Wilson, Walsh, & Kirby, 2007, p. 3). The reflection-on-action process can occur in WIL at any time. It can be informal,

such as conversations with peers in the workplace, workshops or lectures, or formal, such as written reflections in assessments.

In WIL, Cord and Clements (2010) have identified three dimensions of reflection-on-action which evaluates a student's personal and professional growth. These are:

*Self-assurance*: denotes ownership of a belief or skill (e.g. 'I am a great listener')

*Self-improvement*: recognizes the development, improvement or growth of a belief or skills (e.g. 'I have improved my listening skills')

*Self-awareness*: recognition on the part of the student to improve the belief or skill (e.g. 'I need to work on my listening skills')

Effective assessments will facilitate reflective practice in a way that supports learners who may be at different places on this learning spectrum, to recognize these dimensions relative to a breadth of skills and knowledge learnt on placement. Rather than determining what the learner will learn or to what standard, reflective assessments are better employed as scaffolds to allow the students to come to this recognition themselves.

In higher education more generally, reflection for assessment has been further distinguished based on how it is used and the knowledge and understanding it expresses. Specifically, Ryan (2012) characterizes two modes of reflective assessment: discursive and performative. Discursive modes of reflection can be written or oral and conveyed either in text or by presentation. Performative modes of reflection can be still or moving visual forms, including dance, music, sound or visual representations. Research into discursive modes of reflection, such as a written reflective journal, have sought ways to improve reflective writing (Ryan, 2011) and evaluate the degree of reflective thinking (Kember, 1999), to enhance learning through this medium. In this study, we were interested in examining discursive reflection for assessment as a mechanism to engage interns in processes of reflection-on-action, through an online learning platform.

## ENHANCING LEARNING THROUGH ONLINE ASSESSMENT

In more recent times, the internet, as opposed to the written page, has become a popular medium for reflective writing (Mansor, 2011). With the emergence of strategic institutional endorsements for technology enhancement learning, the use of online technologies has become a growing and promising field for applications in WIL.

Various online or technology-based tools are being used to support learning through assessment in WIL. These include, but not limited to, e-portfolios (An & Wilder, 2010), online role play (Ogilvie & Douglas, 2007), online journals (Cord & Clements, 2010) or blogs (Edgar, Francis-Coad, & Connaughton, 2012).

The online learning environment in WIL has been described as the 'de-situated' space (Woodley & Beattie, 2011) that enables students to remain in dual contexts of university (virtually) and the workplace (physically). Through an asynchronous approach, students are allowed time to consider, investigate and reflect before making a response. Furthermore, studies show that students are better supported when using a reliable and familiar online learning platform, to minimize the risk of technical or application issues (Ogilvie & Douglas, 2007).

Enhancing learning of reflective practice by using an online assessment mechanism for students in distributed locations appears to be a match made-in-heaven. Yet despite their compatibility, we have very limited knowledge on students' perceptions of how they learn the skills required for reflective practice and the benefits or enabling features of online assessment. Our research therefore set out to address questions such as: what do students perceive to be the benefits and limitations of online assessments? How have reflective online assessments engaged students in reflective practice? What are students perceptions on the current assessment design and purpose?

## CONTEXT

The context for this research was a selective entry WIL elective in the University of Wollongong's commerce degree. After submitting a written application, and being chosen by an organization at competitive interview, the final year students undertook a 16 day internship (usually two days a week for eight weeks during a semester) aligned closely with their studies. The academic subject comprised two face-to-face workshops; one with preparatory activities conducted prior to students commencing placements and a second debriefing at the end of their internship. All other learning was achieved by assessments facilitated via an online learning platform which contained assessment information, marking rubrics and resources on reflection which outlined deep versus shallow reflection and included mock samples of both in the context of the WIL assessments. Submission of all assessment was online, as was feedback with comments alongside of journal entries while marking sheets were returned to students for the two larger assessments.

The assessments comprised:

- Reflective Learning Part A (2000 words): Students reflected on their WIL goals and workplace expectations prior to undertaking their placement by answering reflective questions and commenting on strategic WIL literature to identify and understand potential learning benefits achieved from WIL particularly in terms of workplace culture, team work and creative and critical thinking.
- ELogs (200 words minimum per submission): An online reflective journal completed after each day of placement (16 in total) outlining tasks completed, interaction with staff in the workplace and the students' thoughts and feelings overall about their day. This was a more traditional, journal-style, reflection assessment task.
- Reflective Learning Part B (2000 words): Submitted upon completion of the internship, students reflected upon their entire internship experience and answered a series of questions encouraging them to reflect upon university learning compared with learning in the workplace. They were also required to address the similarities and differences between their initial expectations outlined in Reflective Learning Part A and the realities of their internship placement. This assignment also challenged them to outline how they had changed personally and professionally as well as how they would take their insights forward into career planning in the lead up to graduation.

These assessments were designed to help students to apply reflective practice by challenging them to outline their assumptions and expectations in Reflective Learning Part A, be 'mindful' in the workplace via regular completion of eLogs during the internship and identify change and potential for future professional development upon completion of their

placement and completion of Reflective Learning Part B. Ideally they are designed to facilitate the WIL goal of linking theory and practice (McNamara, 2011), learning via reflection (Abeysekera, 2006; Cord et al., 2010; Harvey et al., 2010) and transition students into the workplace by helping them project forward in the lead up to graduation.

## METHOD

A purpose-designed qualitative semi-structured questionnaire was administered online to two tertiary business student cohorts on their completion of the WIL subject in November 2011 and June 2012. The questionnaire was designed to capture student perspectives on the appropriateness of using an online environment for a WIL subject, and, garner evidence of reflective practice development when students undertook these assessments facilitated on the online learning platform. They were required to contribute insights and answer the overarching question: How do learners perceive online assessments as a mechanism to engage them in reflective practice in WIL? Students were free to provide as long or short a response as they felt was appropriate.

As the researchers were teachers in this subject, an independent research assistant distributed the student survey and de-identified the returning data. The resulting data sample included 15 of the 61 students enrolled in Spring semester 2011 and 7 of the 60 students enrolled in Autumn semester 2012. There was an overall response rate of 18%. It is presented that a technical glitch in the Autumn 2012 survey (the embedded link to the survey distributed by the University's Student Online Services system did not click straight through to the survey and required cutting/pasting into a browser) may have resulted in lower participation compared to the Spring 2011 survey.

While the semi-structured questionnaire garnered student perspectives on online assessment as a mechanism to engage them in reflective practice in WIL, the resulting qualitative data was able to be grouped into sub-themes based on aligned student responses. To achieve this the two qualitative data sets were firstly considered separately so that patterns or themes from the students pertaining to a particular semester could be identified, however, as no important differences were apparent, therefore the two samples were then considered as a whole. However, in the findings, participants from the Spring 2011 cohort are referred to as "S-#" and those from Autumn 2012 as 'A#' simply for the purposes of clarity.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### *Perceived Benefits and Disadvantages of Online Assessment*

Students were unanimous in endorsing the flexibility of the online environment. For some students this meant "less uni[versity] contact hours" (A1). Easy assignment submission, multi-site access to course resources and convenience were frequently mentioned as the advantages of online learning, "(a)s it was the only subject I was doing this semester it meant it was easier to do assignments rather than going to campus" (S3). Students favored the ability to complete the required subject submissions off campus, particularly those living some distance away from campus or not attending university regularly, as one student expressed "I found the online submission and feedback using the assignment drop box very useful - simple, stress free, and meant that I didn't need to drive for an hour to hand in an assignment" (S13). This de-situated space (Woodley & Beattie, 2011) had additional advantages for the individual learner as students describe the online space as amenable to

the diverse, personal experiences. In this way it was described as a “more personal and private environment” (A3) in which to share and think in “your own time and space” (S14).

The online environment was also advocated as a support for how students managed their work and study commitments. This student’s comment resonates with this:

It was much less time consuming to pick up resources and submit assignments via E-Learning [the university’s online environment] than in person. This was especially useful when assignments were due on the day that I had my placement and would otherwise have been unable to deliver my assignments in person. (S14)

Another student focused on the enabling features of the online environment to support learners in workplace contexts “(y)ou could concentrate on the internship, and make sure you could make the most of that experience without feeling like university is getting in the way of it” (A4). Another concurs, “(t)here is no short time limit, and no distractions. Therefore, it allowed me to reflect more than in a classroom scenario” (S11). These comments have implications on the design of the assessments as well as the medium, suggesting that the combination facilitates a type of learning that remains work-based, rather than assessments ‘getting in the way of’ practice-based or lifelong learning. The following student comment illuminates this notion: “In a way it was a preparation for workforce and when we do enter it finally we won't have the university there to help us. I believe this way taught us how to work things out on our own”. (S3)

This is an important design feature of online reflection-on-action, where learners feel as though the assessments are an inseparable part of the learning process, and not as a university regulated requirement. This mix can be difficult to achieve in WIL and is often treated as two different things: learning for work and learning for assessment (Dean et al., 2012). The findings suggest that perhaps this mix is finding solutions to balancing this pervasive WIL dilemma.

The role of the tutor, who literately gave timely feedback of e-logs while students were on placement, was pointed out as a process that students valued. One student reflected,

(a)t first I felt like I was just doing the E-logs for the sake of it but then I realised that someone was actually reading all of them and I took them more seriously and tried to actually reflect on my learning” (S7).

This tutor played a critical role in supporting the interns, and was described as “mentor rather than a tutor” (S4). The feedback itself appears to be a catalyst for further learning however is underpinned by the students’ feeling of connectedness to the tutor, “(t)he feedback I gained was just as useful, I still feel we developed a good student-tutor relationship.”(S14).

The online environment was however taking time away from the kind of social learning that occurs when people are brought together physically in classrooms. For some this promoted independent learning, for example, “...the online environment means that you can't look to the tutor or lecturer for hints or answers. You have to think about it in your own time and space” (S14). Three students however indicated that this was a limitation of online assessments, expressing the need for more peer-to-peer communication. For these students, they felt they were “unable to experience interactive learning with other interns” (S8). One student recommended “(t)he introduction or enforcement of an online forum for interns would promote interaction towards experiences and knowledge toward the tasks” (S7). We feel the inclusion of a discussion forum to facilitate discussion between interns is a useful



suggestion. We believe such a forum would be better served not as an assessment that is enforced but rather a tool to bring together a community of almost-practitioners, to share and feel connected with each other and their tutor while away on placement.

Another student highlighted that without regular face-to-face contact while on placement they felt less incentivized or accountable for submitting work on time. They suggested perhaps considering enhancing the communication strategy while students are on placement to include sending out reminders of upcoming assessments. This again is another useful recommendation to take on board and a practical strategy that will enhance our engagement with learners while off campus.

Despite the limitations of social learning in WIL given that learners are in dispersed workplaces, we recognize the significance of students coming together to share, deliberate and reflect on their experiences, something that we can enhance in our current design and structure. We have had two face-to-face workshops and in light of these findings will consider introducing an intermediate workshop half-way through the semester. We do believe though for the most part, the online assessments have offered multiple and significant benefits.

#### *Perceived Engagement in Reflective Practice Through Online Assessments*

Most students commented that the online assessments engaged them in reflection which enhanced their learning: "by reflecting on each day, I was able to see what I needed to work on and the experiences that I may have overlooked" (S8). Students stated that the reflective assessments helped them achieve greater clarity, consolidate knowledge and better understand their workplace experience. As one student explains: "[Reflective assessments] enabled me to recall the work I had performed mentally to be able to perform better the next time that task was required" (A6). The findings suggest this discursive mode of reflection (Ryan, 2011) assisted students to evaluate their actions and therefore prompt reflective thought (Kember, 1999).

The findings indicate that the assessments served a useful purpose to encourage students to pause and think. The following participant explains how they developed from this reflection-on-action:

The reflective learning facilitated learning. Often in the heat of the moment there is little time to analyse what was successful or not - you just have to keep going. When you stop to think, it stimulates learning from past mistakes and improves the overall process of all actions. (A5)

This addresses a fundamental goal of WIL which is to help students' link theory with placement practices (Harvey et al., 2010). Student responses illustrated that engagement in reflective practice also built their ability to retain information and knowledge on what the activities they had performed on placement. On this point, one student commented:

They [reflective assessments] helped increase retention of the knowledge and skills learnt, assisted in making connections between the real-world and what you are taught at uni and it helped increase my confidence as it showed me I knew more than I thought I did. (A2)

Students were able to self-analyze their internships and as a result "...better understand the workplace and how it is different from uni" (S4). Noticing these differences is important as learning in workplaces has greater synergy with lifelong learning contexts.

Therefore, consistent with similar studies in WIL (Cord & Clements, 2010; Thorpe, 2004; Wilson et al., 2007), the findings suggest that students performed reflective practice to evaluate where they're at and for the purposes of lifelong learning. Aligned with Cord and Clements' (2010) three dimensions of learning, students reported growth in self-assurance, self-improvement and self-awareness, indicating the structure of the assessments as commensurate with reflective practice for learners who have heterogeneous experiences on placement. This also indicates that the assessments are appropriately scaffolding learning in a way that allowed learners to become personally aware of their beliefs, knowledge and skills to improve practice in the immediate sense, as well as something they can take with them in the future.

#### *Evaluation of Assessment Design*

We asked students to respond to the format of the assessments to ascertain if the purpose of each assessment was being met. In the first reflective assessment (Reflective Learning Part A), students were asked to outline their goals and aspirations for their internships. They were provided with literature to stimulate consideration of what their internship might help them to achieve beyond their immediate goal of becoming employable. Students seemed to be responsive to this purpose, stating that the first reflective journal: "Made me think about what I want out of my time during internship" (S10) and that by "(j)ust reading the literature [it] made me realise the importance of internships and how beneficial they will be for me in developing skills" (A3). We feel confident that this assessment achieves the aims we had outlined, however we were surprised little was mentioned on the process of 'how to reflect' as students seemed already comfortable with this discursive mode of reflection.

The findings suggested that students felt the ELogs as more immediately useful to their learning. For example, "(d)aily self-reflection allowed critical examination of the day's activities. Something which I would not have undertaken without something like this" (S7). As mentioned previously, the ongoing feedback for each ELog was pivotal to why students valued this assessment, which is aligned with existing literature in WIL (Harvey et al., 2010) on the role and importance of feedback. This assessment also assisted students to engage in reflective practice required to complete the final assessment (Reflective Learning Part B). As a student outlines "(h)aving completed the e-logs and being able to access them in order of their dates made completing the other two main reflections much easier" (S15).

Responses to Reflective Assessment Part B suggested that students felt this was the most beneficial assessment. Our aim for this assessment was to draw the overall experience together to produce a cohesive reflection back on what the students did and learnt on placement. Students spoke about how this assessment made them revisit their experiences, understand it and learn from it once again, "it helped me to reflect back on what I had done and it reinforced what I had learnt" (S6). This student captures this idea:

It forced me to think about what I had learned across a number of modules. Because it was a larger assessment (as opposed to the weekly e-logs) and was conducted at the end of the placement, I found it gave me a great overview of what I had learned, and my experience as a whole. (S14).

It even helped some students look forward into their careers:

(i)t made me reflect on what I had actually learned from the experience and made me more aware of the new skills acquired through the experience as well as giving me a better understanding of the kind of job I would like to have. (S1).

Overall, as it required students to review their learning experiences as a 'learning summary', this final assessment offered an overview of the students' chosen profession and a better understanding of themselves.

In total, each assessment has built on one another for students to learn but also for students to 'practise reflective practice'. The findings of this study suggest that reflection-on-action has helped students capture thoughts, feelings, ideas and actions emerging from the multiple informal opportunities created by their internships and convert these into learnings that could be articulated to others. It is clear that students did value this process and this ideally would encourage them to embrace reflective practice as an important lifelong skill - to be harnessed continuously - and moreover, further aiding their transition into professional practice.

Indeed, the only students who commented that the reflective assessments did not contribute to their WIL explained, "(t)hey didn't really enhance my experience, as they were things that I expected already would have come from the internship" (S5). Another draws on their previous work experiences to discuss,

As I have worked before (although in different industries to the one I was placed in) I did not find the reflective essays helpful in terms of expectations as I had experiences to draw from instead, although I can see how they would be helpful to the many students who have not worked before. (S15)

This comment reinforces the notion that students come from diverse backgrounds and experiences and that assessment needs to accommodate for this diversity. Although this particular student mentions the assessments were perhaps not as useful, compared to others, reflection-on-action is not designed to be a one-off activity. Every experience will be different. Every experience may create new learning opportunities. We recognize that although this student didn't see the usefulness of the assessments in terms of expectations, reflective practice is overall, as we have found in this study, beneficial for *multiple* reasons.

## CONCLUSION

This study has explored students' perceptions on the use of online assessments for engagement in reflective practice as a critical constituent of undertaking learning through WIL. Overall, what we have found is that students' perceptions of the efficacy of the reflective mechanism itself is largely positive. Not only did the online environment accommodate the time and travel logistics associated with students undertaking an internship but, in some cases, its flexibility in time and place also meant that students engaged with assessments in a more independent, thoughtful and, perhaps, more meaningful way as it related directly to their personal experience. Indeed, the importance of the learner as a proactive creator of their learning environment opens the doors to a myriad of interesting research questions considering where and when students choose to undertake online learning. The study also demonstrates that the assessment design promotes reflective practice in multiple ways, for learners from diverse backgrounds and experiences.

The ability to facilitate WIL via an online learning platform is pertinent to practitioners who need to ensure that students have space in their academic schedules for workplace-based learning concurrent to other classroom-based subjects. We believe that we have demonstrated that this is possible and the learning outcomes are achieved even when learning is facilitated predominantly online. Online assessments are endorsed as critical

learning opportunities for students to iteratively look back on their actions to consider or record improvements as well as to 'practise reflective practice'. A number of recommendations have emerged through the study which we will endeavor to explore further.

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