

National Association of Field Experience (NAFEA) Annual Conference

Report: John Harris, Flinders University, Conference Convenor

Dates: 15th – 17th November 2006

Venues: Flinders University and Tabor Adelaide

Number Attended: 65

Number of Universities represented: 25 from NSW, Victoria, Qld, WA, ACT and SA

Schools and Disciplines represented: Law, Education, Nursing & Widwifery, Speech Pathology, Pharmacy, Social Work, Cultural Tourism, Theology,

From all accounts, the annual NAFEA conference was a huge success. Many delegates made particular mention of the high calibre of the keynote speakers and of the overall professional nature of the conference. Both Flinders University and Tabor Adelaide were excellent venues and provided delegates with an especially good impression of Adelaide.

Deputy Vice Chancellor, Professor Joan Cooper, gave the *Opening Address* and, in announcing the theme of “Innovation & Excellence”, acknowledged the many new and sometimes challenging developments in the field experience and practicum programs. Prof Joan Cooper made special reference to the complexities of the placement process and of the importance of this conference in providing opportunities for people to examine the strengths of their current practice and to consider other ideas for effective change. Prof Cooper mentioned that, although field experience and practicum programs are regarded as good, are supported by employers who are recruiting and are valued by both students who want to be work ready and academics who want students to see their topic in practice, field experience programs can be a drain on scarce resources. Innovative ideas are needed to make the most use of the resources available and to make the field experience an especially meaningful experience for the student, the potential future employer and the university academic.

At the *Welcome Function* held the previous evening, Felicity Lewis, Assistant Dean (Academic), Lecturer in the School of Education at Flinders University and Mayor of the City of Marion, gave the delegates a most warm welcome to Adelaide. Delegates appreciated Felicity’s experience with the practicum programs and her vast knowledge of shopping and tourism opportunities in Adelaide and the nearby wine growing areas.

Rachel Spencer, Senior Lecturer in Law and Director of Professional Legal Training in the School of Law at Flinders University gave the first keynote address. Her talk, *Your Place or Mine? Evaluating the perspectives of the Practical Legal Training work experience Placement through the eyes of the supervisors and the students*, was especially well received and provided an excellent overview of the place of the field experience programs within the degree courses. The scenarios, challenges and strategies to cope with the complexities of practicum placements that Rachel mentioned were all very relatable to the delegates from a wide range of schools disciplines. Rachel’s paper will most likely be published in the International Education Journal.

The second keynote address was presented by Sue McAllister, PhD from The COMPASS™ Project, The Universities of Sydney and Newcastle

Sue’s topic *Facilitating and Assessing Student Learning in the Workplace* presented workplace learning as an authentic, highly valued activity for students, which offers unique learning experiences critical for the preparation of professionals who are able to transform knowledge into excellent practice on a daily basis. High quality assessment practices have an important facilitating role in this challenging learning process.

Sue’s presentation outlined key issues and practical strategies for developing and implementing high quality and fair assessment practices that ensure that the workplace experience is an effective learning experience for students. Lessons learnt in the development, trialling, and validation of COMPASS™: Competency Assessment in Speech Pathology (SPA, 2006) were shared.

After lunch, Keynote Speakers: Catherine Koerner and John Harris, from Flinders University, presented a paper, ***Inspired Learning. INSPIRE Peer Mentoring.*** Catherine and John used the successful INSPIRE Peer Mentor Program to discuss how universities can engage with their local communities to nurture teaching and learning environments. Through INSPIRE, young people 'at risk' of disengaging from formal education are supported to complete their current studies and to consider further education. Mentors gain valuable skills and experiences as professional development while Educators gain the latest knowledge in specialised areas as well as increased access to the University. INSPIRE is a model of university to community engagement within formal and alternative learning environments in low socio-economic areas. The model has been implemented within the Faculty of Education at Flinders University due to feedback from school students, Education students and Teaching staff that there is greater benefit for Education students to maintain an ongoing relationship with classroom students and teachers over a full semester or year than can be gained through traditional block teaching practicum as the predominant method of teacher-preparation for pre-service teachers.

The final presentation for the afternoon was by Robyn Lumby and Dawn Whitby, University of Wollongong, who gave an overview of the development of practicum management software ***The Practicum Administrator.***

The Practicum Administrator is a web-based solution for allocating practicum placements for students. After two years of testing and development, the program is integral to the placement process for 1,000 students annually from within the University of Wollongong.

The software is currently being considered for use by the Teaching Experience Centre at Flinders University with a view to being adopted by the various practicum providers at Flinders University.

The Annual General Meeting for NAFEA was held at Tabor Adelaide on Friday morning, 17th November.

Following the AGM, Gordon Baker, a former lecturer at Flinders University, gave an outstanding account of the unique ***Anangu Lands Practicum Project*** conducted at Flinders University. Gordon gave an outline of the history of the project and how it has significantly impacted on the quality of education for indigenous students on the Lands and on the quality of teacher training of future teachers.

Gordon's description of this unique practicum experience conducted in association with the Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS) gave delegates an insight into the challenges and beauty of the lands. The Lands program is especially successful and attracts many applicants each year from the third year students.

Natalie Vernuccio and Leigh Richardson from Victoria University gave the final presentation for the conference. Natalie and Leigh gave an overview of the ***Project Partnerships*** program which provides the basis for preservice teachers to develop practice within the School of Education programs at Victoria University, including both the B Ed and Dip Ed courses. The preservice teachers are at the same school for the year and the school-university partnerships are designed to enhance the learning of school students and preservice teachers.

Summary.

The NAFEA Annual Conference gave both academic and general staff involved with field experience and practicum programs from a wide variety of Australian universities a chance to exchange ideas and to consider innovative ways for dealing with challenges developing in the future. Of particular concern is the declared ***crisis*** in NSW and Victorian universities in securing practicum placements for education students. There are increasing strains being placed on our resources and it often seems that more is expected from fewer available field experience places. Most of the delegates left with renewed energy and are looking forward to the 2007 conference in Townsville.

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