

POVERTY ON PLACEMENT

A campaign by the UQ Union to investigate stresses
on students during placement



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Contents

Introduction.....	2
Methodology.....	3
Results.....	4
Study area.....	4
Format.....	5
Location.....	7
Out of pocket costs.....	8
Lost Income.....	10
Coping Financially.....	11
Statements from students and student representatives.....	12
Conclusions.....	15
Recommendations.....	16



Introduction

Placements are defined as any activity mandated by the University as part of a students' program, which involves undertaking a period of practical learning with an organisation that is not UQ. The growing incorporation of placement activities into curricula offers students an opportunity to gain practical experience and improve their work readiness. The nature of a placement however, is distinctly different to that of other coursework studies and places a unique set of pressures on students.

Through the [Academic Advocacy Network](#), a body of student representatives coordinated by the UQ Union, financial stress during placement was first flagged as an issue. Student representatives highlighted several areas of concern, in particular, out of pocket costs and lost income as a result of an inability to work while on placement. The resulting effects on mental health and academic achievement were also raised.

The Director of UQ Student Employability (Dino Willox) was engaged, who advised that a 'Rural and Remote Grant Scheme' was piloted in the Faculty of Health and Behavioural Sciences in Semester 2, 2018. As part of the scheme:

- 126 students carrying out placement in rural or remote Australia received a \$1000 grant;
- 30 students on international placements received a grant of \$1000;
- 1 student received a \$3000 hardship grant.

The pilot received extremely positive feedback from students, who were overwhelmingly grateful for the financial assistance.

The UQ Union and Student Employability discussed whether a similar scheme could be expanded to more students on placement, given the concerns raised by student representatives. Both parties agreed to undertake a survey of students on placement to examine their financial needs and see whether an expanded financial support scheme would be needed.



Methodology

The Poverty on Placement campaign ran for 3 months, from July to September 2019. A detailed survey was promoted on the UQ Union's social media channels over this period. Student representatives in relevant Schools (Nursing, Midwifery and Social Work, Rehabilitation Sciences, Dentistry, Pharmacy, Earth and Environmental Sciences, Human Movement and Nutrition Sciences, Education, Veterinary Sciences) also promoted the survey heavily through cohort channels. UQU vouchers were offered as incentive for completing the survey.

Students who had previously completed a placement were invited to complete the survey.

The survey queried:

- Study area
- Course code for the placement (if applicable)
- Length of placement
- Position of placement in relation to the program (e.g. final year)
- Placement location
- Estimates of out of pocket costs incurred
- Estimates of lost income
- Whether these out of pocket costs negatively affected educational attainment (Likert scale)
- Whether the loss of income negatively affected educational attainment (Likert scale)
- How the student financially supported themselves during the placement



Results

Study area

In total, 359 submissions were received from a diverse group of students (Table 1)

Table 1: Break down of respondents' study area. Study areas with less than 5 respondents were grouped under 'Other' which consisted of respondents from: Advanced Finance and Economics, Arts, Communication, Engineering, International Hotel & Tourism Management, Journalism, Science, Food Science and Technology, Applied Science, Agricultural Science, Regional and Town Planning, Dental Science and Dietetics.

Study area	Number of respondents (% of total)
Education	14 (3.9)
Environmental Management	5 (1.4)
Exercise and Sport Science	8 (2.2)
Medicine	25 (6.9)
Nursing and/or Midwifery	94 (26.2)
Occupational Therapy	28 (7.8)
Pharmacy	39 (10.8)
Physiotherapy	16 (4.5)
Social Work	11 (3.0)
Speech Pathology	5 (1.4)
Veterinary Science	68 (18.9)
Veterinary Technology	20 (5.6)
Other	26 (7.2)



Format

All placements were attached to a course, except for respondents in Engineering, Advanced Finance and Economics, and Arts. Engineering students had placements as part of their professional practice hours. The respondents in Advanced Finance and Economics, and Arts had completed unpaid internships outside of a UQ course.

The length, position and intensity of the placement in relation to a students' program varied across disciplines:

- Education students complete multiple placements throughout their program, generally lasting several weeks up to 60 days, depending on the course. These are completed as an intensive block requiring full time commitment of the student.
- In Environmental Management, third year students must complete a minimum of 270 hours of practical experience with a third party organisation. This can be spread over a 13-week semester, which equates to a part time load of 20 hours p/week.
- In Exercise and Sport Science, final year students are required to complete a minimum of 400 hours practical experience spread over the year.
- In Medicine, almost the entirety of third and fourth year consists of a variety of intensive placements ranging from several weeks to several months in duration.
- In Nursing and/or Midwifery, students complete over 1000 hours of practical experience divided into several different courses over the duration of their program. Over the first 2 years of the program, this is completed in 15 x 8 hour shifts per semester. In final year, Nursing and/or Midwifery students complete over 600 hours of practical experience, intended to be divided into a number of 8 hour shifts over the year.
- Occupational Therapy students are required to complete over 1000 hours of practical experience as part of their program. Similar to Nursing and/or Midwifery, this is divided into several different courses. In early years, placement hours are typically spread into sessional blocks over several weeks in the semester. In final years, placement occurs in an intensive, full time fashion typically over several months.
- Pharmacy students are required to complete over 350 hours of practical experience as part of their program. In early years, students are required to complete sessional placement experiences. As the program progresses, placements become more intensive and full time, building up in length from one week to several weeks.



- Physiotherapy students are required to complete five 5-week full time, intensive placements in 4th year.
- Social Work students must complete 1000 hours of practical experience in their program, with an 18 week, 500-hour placement in 3rd year being the most significant.
- Speech Pathology students must complete a variety of intensive and sessional placements over their program generally lasting several weeks if in a block, or over the semester if sessional.
- For Veterinary Science students, they are required to complete 10 weeks of practical experience from first year to third year. This is conducted in students' own time. In fifth year, Veterinary Science students complete full time placements typically consisting of at least 5 day weeks with a minimum of 40 hours per week. In particular, students are expected to be "on call" and within 20 minutes of the campus for one of these placements.
- Veterinary Technology students complete full time placements in their third year over a 6-month period.



Location

The location of respondents' placements is summarised in Table 2 using a modification of the Australian Standard Geographical Classification - Remoteness Area (ASGC-RA) system. Students' responses were organised in a way that better demonstrated the level of dislocation a student may experience as part of their placement. For example, while a placement in Sydney may be classified as 'RA 1' under the ASGC-RA system, a student would still experience significant disruption so it would not be appropriate to classify them with a student conducting a placement in Brisbane.

Table 2: Classification of placement locations

Location	Number of students reporting
Metropolitan (RA 1 in QLD)	179
Inner Regional (RA 2 in QLD)	128
Outer Regional (RA 3 in QLD)	33
Remote (RA 4 in QLD)	3
Very Remote (RA 5 in QLD)	1
Overseas	27
Interstate (Any RA, not in QLD)	33
Combination (unspecified)	16
Other	5

Many students discussed multiple placements in their responses and so when a student gave multiple locations, they were counted separately. Although students were asked to describe specifically where their placement was, some students simply put 'rural' or 'regional' in their answer. In this case, the student's answer was classified under Inner Regional.



Out of pocket costs

The out of pocket costs incurred by students is strongly linked with discipline, placement location and format (Table 3).

Table 3: Summary of out of pocket costs

Type of cost	Number of students reporting (% of all students)	Average cost	Common respondents in:
Short distance travel (e.g. fuel, public transport, parking, Ubers)	204 (57)	\$50 a week, up to \$20 – 50 per day	All disciplines
Study resources (e.g. equipment, uniforms, vaccinations)	131 (36)	Up to \$300	Pharmacy, Nursing and/or Midwifery, Education, Veterinary Science, Veterinary Technology
Long distance travel (e.g. flights, fuel)	105 (29)	\$200-\$2000 flights \$150 a week driving	Regional/Rural/Overseas/Interstate locations
Accommodation	100 (28)	\$200-300 p/week	Regional/Rural/Overseas/Interstate locations, Veterinary Science, Veterinary Technology, Nursing and/or Midwifery, extended placements (>1 week)
Food/Groceries	56 (16)	Up to \$150 p/week for regional/rural placements	Regional/Rural locations, Veterinary Science, Veterinary Technology, Nursing and/or Midwifery, extended placements (>1 week)

Short distance travel was the most commonly reported out of pocket cost, reported in all disciplines. In addition to fuel, public transport and parking, many students were also forced



to pay for Ubers/taxis. Often, the placement would begin early or end late (when there would be no public transport running) or otherwise be located in an area poorly serviced by public transport. For placement shifts ending late at night, safety was a large factor in many students opting to pay for Ubers/taxis. This was particularly pertinent for female students. The costs incurred under this category varied widely. In placement locations serviced well by public transport and for students with cars, costs were typically \$50 p/week. However, costs increase significantly to typically \$20 p/day in situations described above where public transport is inadequate.

Study resources was the second most commonly reported cost and was extensively reported by Pharmacy, Nursing and/or Midwifery, Education, Veterinary Science and Veterinary Technology students. Commonly reported costs included vaccinations, uniforms or other professional attire, shoes and equipment such as fob watches and stethoscopes which typically totalled into the hundreds of dollars. Education students were also commonly required to purchase school supplies for their placement, such as stationary.

Long distance travel, accommodation and groceries were commonly reported costs for students undertaking regional/rural/overseas/interstate placements. The increased cost of fresh fruit and vegetables in regional and rural Australia was a contributing factor to students' grocery costs. Veterinary Science and Veterinary Technology students commonly raised concerns regarding placements on farms, which often did not provide food and accommodation as part of the placement. Furthermore, in one fifth-year Veterinary Science placement, students were required to be within 15 minutes of the animal hospital which forced many students to seek alternative accommodation.

Surprisingly, accommodation and groceries were also commonly reported by Nursing and/or Midwifery students, many of whom undertook placement in the Brisbane area. Due to the long hours, many students chose to 'double rent', leasing accommodation closer to their placement location in addition to their original housing, as they did not own a car and/or did not wish to travel over an hour to their placement. Altogether, increased accommodation costs were typically \$200-300 p/week. Long hours and travel times meant that students were also often unable to prepare their own meals and were forced to buy food during late night shifts.

Of all students, 58.6 % agreed or strongly agreed that the out of pocket costs incurred negatively impacted on their educational attainment.



Lost Income

85.2 % of students stated that they lost some form of income as a result of taking part in the placement and 68 % agreed or strongly agreed that the lost income negatively impacted on their educational attainment.

When examining the responses from a discipline point of view, no correlation was found between placement format and rates of lost income. While Medicine essentially has 2 years of intensive placement, Medicine students had the lowest reported rate of lost income. And while Environmental Management and Exercise and Sport Science students do not complete intensive blocks of placement, the rate of lost income was not lower than respondents in other disciplines. While there are varying sample sizes of students surveyed in each study area, it appears from this data that the format of placement has little correlation with the impact on students' income.

Table 4: Rate and impact of lost income in various disciplines

Study area	% respondents losing income	% respondents agree or strongly agree that lost income negatively impacted educational attainment
Education	100	77
Environmental Management	75	33
Exercise and Sport Science	83	80
Medicine	56	85
Nursing and/or Midwifery	93	67
Occupational Therapy	96	74
Pharmacy	63	58
Physiotherapy	100	71
Social Work	87	57
Speech Pathology	100	60
Veterinary Science	87	76
Veterinary Technology	89	88



Coping Financially

Students generally reported several strategies for coping financially (Table 5). Where students cited multiple coping methods, these were counted separately and it is worth noting that many students did report adopting a combination of financial coping strategies.

Table 5: Students' responses to how they coped financially

Method	Number of students reporting (% of all students)
Working on nights, weekends, holidays	149 (42)
Relying on family or partner (e.g. moving in with parents, loans)	172 (48)
Using savings	82 (23)
Centrelink (e.g. Youth Allowance, Aus study)	98 (27)
Scholarship and/or formal financial support	24 (7)
Living cut backs (e.g. food, use of credit cards)	30 (8)

Most commonly, students simply kept working around their placement schedules and for those who were able to, relied on their family or partner. Many students who worked around their placement reported feeling overworked and fatigued, which impacted on their ability to learn. Furthermore, many students stated that the impact of a placement was felt before it even began, as they were forced to work additional hours leading up to the placement in order to save. Of those students who received formal financial support, some reported that the payments were not made in time. Finally, the most troubling finding was that 8 % of students reported making direct cut backs to their living situation, including skipping meals and relying on credit cards.



Statements from students and student representatives

While attempts have been made to quantify the impacts on students, it is also relevant to present some qualitative information given by students. Several of the questions in the survey were open-ended and so many respondents were able to provide detailed insights into the financial and mental health impacts of the placement. A selection of these responses, as well as statements from student representatives engaged as part of this campaign have been included below. These have been grouped loosely into impacts on living situation and impacts on mental health, but the stresses on students commonly overlap.

Impacts on living situation

“I had to stop eating to be able to pay for the final 2 weeks of rent of my last placement at the Gold Coast. I had to limit myself to a pack of Mi Goreng a day. It got so bad that my clinical educator and other staff around me felt sorry and started bringing in me lunch and other food. I would normally work 4/5 weeknights and both days on the weekend, I had to start relying on my parents for financial support which I'm expected to pay back (still doing so), I am not an Australian citizen or PR so I didn't receive any youth allowance etc, I also didn't receive any scholarships to which I had applied for.” – Physiotherapy Student

*“I'm a university tutor - and when I'm out west on rotation I miss out on all of my income for that semester. Then all I've got is centrelink, my taxable income for last year was \$14k, *well below* the poverty line. This didn't just impact me educationally, I legitimately went bin diving last year at Aldi and IGA in west end/south bank to help feed myself.” – Medicine Student*

“Youth Allowance (100% not supportive enough). I also got loans from my grandparents and parents. There was one day where I have -\$36 in my bank account and didn't have a way home from placement. Go card was overdrawn. It was terrifying.” – Social Work Student

“[Dealt with] the worst supervisor I've ever had in my life who didn't understand that I had to work as well on the side. I literally worked whenever the placement was supposed to end and this affected me greatly because my placement supervisor was always running late and I had to leave during sessions. She got quite mad at me for this and even blamed me for using her but I needed to pay my rent and my bills? I have been living out of home since I was 14 years old and support myself without the support of anyone else as my parents were abusive or not in my life. I had to save up money and I did have some Centrelink support but I didn't not cover all my necessities. Just barely my rent but not my phone, my uniform, my transport.” – Exercise and Sport Science Student



“There’s a School rule that you are only supposed to work a certain number of hours on placement. This is to ensure patient safety and so we’re not fatigued during our placements but I know for heaps of students that this is just not realistic” - Nursing Student

“I had to apply for youth allowance however I was waiting for over two months to get it. I ended up getting help from my parents but it meant skipping meals and overdrawing my account on a number of occasions. This was just to pay my rent and groceries, I stopped socialising and spending any unnecessary money.” – International Hotel and Tourism Management Student

“I was forced to rely on support from friends and family, the pay from hours that I was able to work all went to rent & fuel as such my diet has been lacking as has my social life. I tried to apply for a scholarship to assist with my financial burden however I was unsuccessful so I am now in debt to friends in family.” – Nursing and Midwifery Student

“I could not work when on placement. I had to rely on Austudy (\$0 left after covering my fortnightly rent!), family, my almost-empty savings and a credit card.” – Veterinary Science

Impacts on mental health

“Worked double shifts- 8 hours after placement shifts. Extremely exhausting and burnt out as a result, no motivation to come to placement. Constantly tired and just struggling to turn up to shifts.” – Nursing Student

“After completing placement 7am-6pm Monday-Friday every day for 12 months, I worked 5 hour shifts on Wednesday nights” – Veterinary Science Student

“I’m essentially working 6 days a week full-time through a combination of placement and casual work. Equivalent to around 55-60hrs a week. Whilst I’m not losing any income I would normally have, I’m already beginning to feel extremely fatigued and stressed out at times.” – Exercise and Sport Science Student

“If I had an AM shift starting at 7am, I would have to take an uber from my residence to the train station in the city, take the train to Cleveland station and then take an uber to Redlands hospital, or walk 45 minutes as buses did not run that early. If I wanted to save the \$15 on ubers to the city it would mean leaving home at 4:15am, and the uber from Cleveland to Redland Hospital was usually about \$10-15 as well resulting in over \$30 (\$5ish



train) for an AM. For PM shifts finishing at 11pm, I was able to arrive fine through public transport (\$5), however, to go home at night the trains would not run past then. The Uber cost to get from Redlands Hospital back to my home was anywhere between \$80 and \$100...I am forced to pay so much just to attend placement.”

– Nursing Student

“I was fired from my job of 3 years due to having poor availability as I could only work on weekends. I also had to quit my other job as the business was only open on week days. I then could not find a new job as nobody wanted to hire a soon to be uni graduate that had extremely limited availability and would be going away on placements later in the year.” – Exercise and Sport Science Student

“After a while paying rent became very difficult so I made the decision to move back home. Not only did this entail waking up at 3am in the morning for a 6.00am start, but meant I was spending a ridiculous amount of money for parking and petrol. The worst part of all was third year. We are expected to attend 8 hours shift work of placement 4/5 days a week for approx. 3/4 of the semester. This makes working almost impossible especially if your work place is closed on the weekends. I’ve resorted to having to ask for money from my family so that I can continue paying for petrol, life costs and medical costs... If I did not have my family I would have had to drop out.” – Nursing Student

“I had to continue working a minimum of 30 hours a week. Making my weeks 70hrs long including prac and work but excluding time for study/ assignments etc.” – Nursing and Midwifery Student

“I was not eligible for youth allowance and my family weren’t in a situation in which they could assist me. As such I have worked two casual jobs for the entirety of my degree. This semester I quit one job due to the increased placement hours and lack of sleep trying to coordinate my schedule” – Nursing Student

“Being an international student from India part time job is very important to survive the higher living cost, during placement of 14-week period I’m not able to do any part time job, too far location and no public transport arise a need of own transportation which leads to extra fuel cost and vehicle cost as well. Without being able to work part time it is difficult to pay rent and other expenses.” – Food Science and Technology Student



Conclusions

The pressures placed on individual students arise from an intersection of various factors, including the length, format and location of the placement, as well as their personal circumstances.

Key facts:

- Out of pocket costs are strongly linked to discipline, placement location and format
- 58.6 % of students said these costs negatively affected their educational attainment
- 85.2 % of students said they lost some form of income
- 68 % of students said this negatively affected their educational attainment
- 42 % of students were forced to work nights, weekends and holidays to support their placement
- Almost half of students (48 %) were forced to rely on their family/partner financially during their placement
- 8 % of students reported having to make living sacrifices to get through their placement, including cut backs on food and use of credit cards
- Only 7% of students received some form of formal financial support from UQ or other organisations



Recommendations

It is clear that existing forms of financial support from UQ and other organisations are unable to meet the needs of students on placement. The UQ Union strongly supports the introduction of a funding scheme for students on placement, similar to existing funding arrangements offered by UQ Employability such as the Employability Grant and the Summer Research Scholarship.

In line with such schemes and the “Rural and Remote Grant Scheme” pilot in the HABS Faculty, the UQ Union proposes the following grant structure:

- Minimum \$500 grant for **all** placements to cover the up to \$300 in study related costs, \$20-50 p/day in short distance travel costs and supplement lost income.
- An additional \$200 p/week living stipend for regional/rural/interstate or intensive, extended (longer than one week) placements to cover long distance travel costs, accommodation, groceries and the significant loss of income experienced.

These grants should be paid as soon as possible after the census date, to ensure that students are able to access the support immediately.

Further to these recommendations, the UQ Union also proposes the introduction of an overarching, systematic mechanism for students’ experiences and issues on placement to be documented both during and after the placement. In our engagement with student representatives, many students said that the UQ Union had been the first to ask them about their financial and mental health on placement. Many students reported there was no formal mechanism within the University to allow them to honestly raise their concerns, and if this existed, did not query the financial and mental health impacts of the placement. A recurring survey querying the financial and mental health of the student should be conducted, particularly pertinent for students undertaking extended placements. This would allow the University to identify at-risk students and make hardship arrangements if required.

