Practicum Placements: an Innovative Opportunity to Foster New Skills for Future Professionals in a Cross-University Collaboration in Western Australia.

Dawn McLoughlin  
*Murdoch University, Australia*, Dawn.McLoughlin@murdoch.edu.au

Daniel Rozas Núñez  
*Murdoch University, Australia*, Daniel.rozasnunez@murdoch.edu.au

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PRACTICUM PLACEMENTS:
AN INNOVATIVE OPPORTUNITY TO FOSTER NEW SKILLS FOR FUTURE PROFESSIONALS IN A CROSS-UNIVERSITY COLLABORATION IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA.

Dawn McLoughlin & Daniel Rozas Núñez
Murdoch University, Australia
Dawn.McLoughlin@murdoch.edu.au, Daniel.rozasnunez@murdoch.edu.au

Abstract
Murdoch University in order to share its collaborative approach to supporting future generations of library professionals organised its first group practicum project in 2017. The project targeted a group of library students from Curtin University with an interest in science fiction. Seven students were recruited for a practicum placement to create a collection development report with recommendations on the management of the library’s Science Fiction Collection. The practicum project was a success, as the students delivered an industry relevant report in an environment that resembles the dynamics of a team project. The Library experience was also successful due to the development of a partnership with Curtin University’s Placement Coordinator and the engagement of Murdoch Library team to support the student experience and the outcomes of this project.

In 2018, the Library decided to develop a new project in conjunction with Curtin University. This time, the Library collaborated with the Curtin University lecturers in creating a new project, from inception to completion, to consolidate the students’ knowledge and experience in information literacy. In 2018, five students carried out a project to create a Special Collections digital learning object and two other projects including the indexing of fanzines using Dublin Core Metadata Elements and a presentation to all Library staff.

The 2018 project proved to be another success for both universities and caught the attention of others in Western Australia. As a result, Murdoch decided to expand its partnership with Curtin University and engaged with other Universities to help them develop similar practicum experiences with the view of developing future partnerships for the benefit of the library and information industry.

This paper will explore Murdoch’s approach to support the library industry in Western Australia through collaboration, engagement and partnerships. The paper will also focus on the lessons learnt and future collaborations following Murdoch’s partnership model.

Keywords: group practicum placements, partnerships, university libraries, library and information skills, Library and Information students, engagement, special collections, workplace-based learning.

Introduction
In 2017, Murdoch University Library organised its first Curtin University Library and Information Studies (LIS) student group practicum placement. The concept of having a group of practicum students, who worked simultaneously on a project, was the brainchild of Susan Ashcroft, former University Librarian at Murdoch and Paul Genoni, former Head of Department of Information Studies at Curtin University. The genesis of the idea developed out of conversations back in 2016. It was hoped that there would be an ongoing project that would involve students having a “tag team” approach, with new students coming each year, picking up and building on the work or projects in previous years.

The rationale for the original concept was twofold:

- Achieving a more rewarding experience for practicum students.
• Providing an output or outcome, which had tangible benefits for the host Library.

It was also hoped that the profile of Murdoch University Library Special Collections would be raised after a number of years when they had low visibility both within and outside the University.

So far two group practicums have been held in 2017 and 2018, with 2019 due to start on 24th June.

Each practicum programme had three elements:
• Orientation and awareness raising of the operations of an academic library.
• A group project.
• Mentoring.

The point of difference for the Murdoch practicum was the scale of what could be achieved because of the number of students, as well as the real work element of working in a team and the need to bring particular skills to bear for a successful outcome. An emphasis was put on mentoring and both the 2017 and 2018 practicum placements included mentorship sessions to students as a two-way conversation about career prospects and professional development. The way the students were recruited was more selective than in an individual practicum. There was a promotional flyer sent out to students to advertise the placement project and ask for expressions of interest to create an air of competition. A selective recruitment process was undertaken and successful students identified based on their skills and experience to fit the project outcomes, much like recruiting to a job vacancy; an application did not guarantee selection.

It was essential that students understood the context of all the sessions in their programme. A project brief was drawn up which set out the scope, objectives and deliverables of the project. A pre-practicum meeting was set up with each group of students to explain the programme and project, and answer any questions. A meeting at the start of the practicum again reviewed the brief, as a refresher. It was necessary to set the scene but also return to it and reinforce it. The short length of the practicum means that the students have to understand the project quickly whilst also assimilating and understanding new information, so the reinforcement helps. The brief was meant to be a guide, providing project deliverables, suggesting tools but without setting in stone how it needs to be achieved. This allowed some creativity and latitude in how the deliverables were achieved and it was for the group to decide who does what.

We wanted the scope of the practicum to be ambitious, engage the student's interest and for them to feel stretched, but this had to be balanced with what can be achieved in three weeks. Each practicum output was non-essential to the operation of the Library, so if the project did not work out as planned then there was not significant impact. The practicum schedule was planned with activity most days but also with blocks of time to devote to project work. The schedule was front loaded with input which lessened as the practicum progressed. This allowed time for work on the project to increase in week two and then again in week three and provided a balance between structure and freedom as described by Ferrer-Vincent & Sobel (Ferrer-Vincent & Sobel, 2011, p. 373).

Practicum Placement Projects

Science Fiction Collection – Collection Development Recommendations Report – 2017

In 2017, Murdoch University Library hosted seven Curtin University’s Library and Information postgraduate students to develop a collection development report with recommendations on the ongoing management of Murdoch’s renowned Science Fiction Collection (Special Collections). The report component of the project included detailed recommendations on:
• How to unify all the collections within Science Fiction via library catalogue entries and library website,
• Best practices in conservation, preservation and storage for all materials within the Science Fiction Collection,
• Collection development strategies to improve collecting practices and to project its growth into the future,
• Website designs and media strategies to further develop the Science Fiction Collection’s online presence,
• Community engagement strategies, including oral history interviews with key members of the Western Australian Science Fiction Community.
• Promotion and marketing strategies, including exhibitions, displays, science fiction talks and University events, such as Open day.

The result was an excellent, well-researched 141 pages report that provided Murdoch University’s Special Collections with relevant and practical recommendations.

The practicum project also included two minor projects. One project required students to use Dublin Core Metadata Elements to index and describe Murdoch’s Leigh Edmonds Fanzine Collections (Special Collections). The resulting indexing was carried out at a high level of description and it was key to the creation of finding aids. The second project required all seven students to develop and deliver a 1-hour presentation to all Murdoch Library staff about their practicum experience, findings and recommendations.

Special Collections Digital Learning Object -2018

In 2018, five Curtin University’s Library and Information postgraduate students carried out a three-week practicum placement. The practicum project consisted in the creation of a digital learning object to promote the University’s Special Collections with a clear educational purpose. The digital learning object required the use of slideshows (narrated), photo albums, videos, audio and combinations of digital objects.

The project included the promotion of a selected number of collections within Special Collections including:

• Science Fiction Collection,
• Leigh Edmonds Collection,
• Irene Greenwood Collection,
• Harry Whittington Collection (WISALTS),
• Abortion Law Reform Association Collection,
• Pankhurst Collection, and
• Peet Collection

The project brief included the following requirements for the creation of the digital learning object:

• Background information about the collections,
• Holdings and collection scope - how they relate to the University's teaching and research programmes,
• Instructions on how to find/access these collections,
• Conditions of use and conditions of access,
• Copyright information,
• A Special Collections web-based learning object that is self-contained and re-usable in other contexts.

The practicum project also included the indexing of two Special Collections:

• Leigh Edmonds Collection
• WEL (Women Electoral Lobby WA) Collection

The purpose of the indexing project was to describe items at a basic level using an Excel spreadsheet. The spreadsheet was based on Dublin Core Metadata Elements and Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules standards.

Another element of the practicum experience included two presentations, one to Curtin University’s Library and Information lecturers, and the other to Murdoch University Library staff on the outcome of the practicum placement and the presentation of the digital learning object.
The resulting Special Collections Digital Learning Object is currently displayed on Murdoch University’s Special Collections webpage.

**SWOT Analysis**

This SWOT analysis represents the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that we have identified after hosting two successful group practicum placements at Murdoch University Library. The analysis is based on data gathered from an internal review on the effectiveness and continuity of this model, from project review briefing notes and from feedback provided by the students participating in the practicum placements.

### INTERNAL FACTORS

#### STRENGTHS (+)

- A group practicum is an innovative approach, unique to Murdoch and can contribute positively to the University’s reputation.

- Murdoch University Library is actively contributing to the development of the Library and Information industry in Western Australia.

- This initiative has interested other organisations in the possibility of hosting a group of practicum students. These organisations include the State Library of Western Australia, the University of Notre Dame Australia and the University of Western Australia.

- A competitive recruitment process enabled Murdoch University to hand pick the students to ensure we had the complementary skills and experience needed for the projects.

- A group of students has the potential to achieve far more than an individual in the short time available in a practicum placement (3 weeks).

- A group practicum provides a better experience for students as the experience resembles a real work environment.

- Output from the practicum has a tangible benefit for the Library.

#### WEAKNESSES (-)

- The time spent in organising a group practicum placement can be substantial.

- Logistical considerations are multiplied when accommodating a group. This includes desk space, computing, system setup and building access.

- Information overload for students. The programmes included a broad range of information sessions and activities that reduced the time available for students to complete the project.

- Lack of regular individual catch up session in the scheduling to assess project progress and performance of individual students.

- Both practicum placements focused on Special Collections. Other areas of the library were not considered in 2017/2018.

### EXTERNAL FACTORS

#### OPPORTUNITIES (+)

#### THREATS (-)
Psychologist David Kolb stated, “Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Juznic & Pymm, 2011, p. 249). Based on this premise, it can be established that one of the strengths of a group practicum placement is the opportunity to give back to the industry by providing new library and information graduates with a meaningful and real-life experience. Such experience allows students to work in an academic library, as well as providing them with the opportunity to close the gap between theory and practice and to gain insights, experience and knowledge by interacting with library stuff, academic librarians and their mentors (Ferrer-Vinet & Sobel, 2011, p. 373). It is also worth noting, that the outcome of the projects is tangible and therefore beneficial for both the library and students. This approach serves as a link between theory and practice as it provides practical and workplace-based learning opportunities for students, as well as providing the University Library with the opportunity to identify potential future employees (Hoy, 2011, p. 39). Furthermore, another observed benefit of the group practicum is an increased reputation that places Murdoch University as an attractive employer for new professionals.

Mentorship is one of the key opportunities to consider for future group placements. Both the 2017 and 2018 practicum placements included mentorship sessions to students as a two-way conversation about career prospects and professional development. The students were able to pick their mentor prior to the start of the practicum, based on their personal professional interest. In order to further expand the mentorship program, we need to focus in training mentors to become supporting coaches throughout the practicum and beyond. Mentors will then provide students with advice and guidance, not only in the practicum project, but also in their professional future, career and job applications. (Lewey & Moody-Goo, 2018, p. 239).

In term of external factors, Murdoch University Library needs to foster collaborative relationships, not only with Curtin University but also with other universities and colleges currently delivering Library and Information studies to broaden the range of the projects.

In order to prevent potential threats to the future success of this project, Murdoch University Library must ensure the group practicum placement projects are industry relevant and linked to the current Library and Information curriculum to keep students and universities interested in participating in this enterprise.

### Engagement

In having a small group, so that students work together, the group practicum created a cooperative learning experience as described by Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, (2013. pp.3-4) where, “individuals seek outcomes that are beneficial to themselves and beneficial to all group members….in order to maximise their own and each other’s learning.” The common goals and positive interdependence enabled the engagement of individuals in the practicum student group to achieve a positive outcome for themselves and the group as a whole.
A key part of the practicum was increased engagement and collaboration with Curtin University and other organisations and this was done in a number of ways and at different levels. A connection with the Practicum Coordinator at Curtin University was established and has been built upon over the last three years. Each year the level and nature of the engagement has broadened and deepened organically. In the second year, Curtin University lecturers were consulted to provide input to the project brief. The main project was linked to a unit of study on digital literacy, so that the students could put aspects of what they had learnt into practice. Thus bridging the perceived “gap” between Library and Information practitioners and Library and Information Educators described by Juznic & Pymm, (2011, p.250) which can impact on the effectiveness of a practicum placement.

The collaboration has also expanded into exploring ways to tap into the talent pool of current and recent graduates for mutual benefit. This was done in a number of ways with Murdoch’s new volunteer programme directly advertised to Curtin University students and recruiting two former practicum students. Curtin University graduates were again the target when recruiting to a casual pool to provide a flexible and scalable staffing resource to plug skill gaps and provide extra capacity in relation to projects, job vacancies or leave. In this case, two former practicum students are currently working with us from this pool. While this strategy has enabled Murdoch University to employ known talent, it is not without significant investment of time for orientation and training with a risk that once trained, and with some experience on their resume, that talent can be lost to other organisations. The benefits so far though have outweighed the negative with Library staff being exposed to new ideas and fresh perspectives from recent graduates with only minimal loss to other organisations.

The group practicum has become a distinctive feature for which Murdoch University is becoming known and has created interest from other universities and libraries. Murdoch has shared the benefits, challenges and learning from the experience with other universities locally and more widely in articles in INCITE Magazine, one authored by Murdoch University and another by Curtin University.

Conclusion

There were a number of areas where we learned lessons and made adaptations to the practicum programme and organisation based on observations, feedback and review. In practice the initial concept of “tag teaming”, has not played out in the way it was envisaged. The first three week practicum focussed on collection development and report with recommendations on the ongoing management of the Library’s Science Fiction Collection (Special Collections) as well as a presentation back to library staff on their activity. In 2018, five Library and Information students carried out a three-week practicum placement to create a Special Collections digital learning object as the main component of the practicum, and included both indexing of a special collection and again presentation back to Library staff on the outcome of the practicum by the students. In 2019, a further three week group practicum has been planned focussing on user experience particularly that of students with a disability. Whilst the first two practicums had a focus on the Special Collections, the most recent one has deviated from this for a number of practical reasons not least of which was staff resourcing. The small Special Collections team would struggle to resource a project each year and the potential student cohort may welcome some variety. It was felt by Murdoch’s Library Management Team that the potential benefits of a group practicum should be shared across other areas of the Library and not be confined to Special Collections. In addition, by different teams hosting the practicum, the workload involved in organising it could be shared and provide a development opportunity for more staff, ensuring there was no single point of failure.

When reviewing the 2017 and 2018 practicums it was estimated that the time that goes into setting up a group practicum is at least twice that of organising a single student practicum. In considering the costs and benefits it was felt that this time commitment was acceptable based on the quality of the output and the benefits accrued. Each practicum has provided a tangible and useful outcome for both Murdoch University and the students who could refer to it when applying for their first post qualification position. Not only can they refer to either a report or digital object but they can draw on experience and skills, such as team work, project management and negotiation skills, developing in a work like environment.

Reflection was built into the practicum for both the students and the organisers at various points. A reflection grid was used to capture student feedback at the end of practicum session which identified
areas which worked well and those in need of improvement or review. In order to be adaptive during
the practicum a brief catch up session was held at the end of each day, between the group and the
practicum organiser. This included checking in on how things were going and identifying any road
blocks or resources needed to keep the project moving forward. In this way, along with the more
formal project review sessions, the project evolved in response to student feedback day by day. A
practicum review report was compiled by Murdoch University Library at the end of the second
practicum in part to recognise the significance of the activity but also to more formally weigh up the
costs and benefits, and provide an opportunity to review if we wished to continue this activity. Staff
reflection on all aspects of the practicum was included. Spending time on reflection was valuable for
the project helping improve as it went along but also to identify what worked and what did not in each
practicum. There was a gap identified during the second practicum in relation to checking in on how
each individual was going. Whilst there was time for group reflections and feedback there were no
individual one on one meetings to check how each individual was getting on. This will be built into our
third group practicum.

A group practicum brings many benefits but an unforeseen challenge was managing the group
dynamics. The group needed to get to know each other and find ways of working together in a
relatively short timeframe. It raised some challenges for some group members while the group
formed. Having a group of students replicated a more real life work experience where they needed to
use their communication and negotiation skills in order to achieve the project outcome. Inevitably
there was some friction early on while roles were established. To aid the formation of the group, in
the next practicum, an icebreaker or team building activity on the first day will be run so they can start
to get to know each other. Also, as mentioned earlier, there are now individual catch up meetings in
the programme to check in on how each individual is going. This is an opportunity for them to raise
any concerns they might have in private. What was seen as an anomaly at first is now seen as a
natural part of the practicum and something to be mindful of and actively manage.

The group practicum is a worthwhile experience evidenced by satisfied students, who have a work
like experience and produce tangible high quality outputs. Whilst it is resource intensive the benefits
far outweigh this investment. So where to from here? In answer, we would like to initiate a discussion
with the other universities and organisations to explore a co-ordinated approach to hosting group
practicums. The number of practicum students are finite and we need to be mindful of this. Whilst we
have shared information with some organisations we have not reached this level of discussion.

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