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# What just happened? Student perspectives on health promotion placements during COVID-19

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## Abstract

**Issue addressed:** The emergence of COVID-19 forced the health industry to re-imagine its role and drove Work Integrated Learning (WIL) practicums into virtual spaces, adding complexity for students in these programs. Studies documenting the impact of these outcomes as well as the student experience during these tumultuous times are few, and therefore this study investigated students' lived experience using data sourced from personal observations and insights and subsequent analysis of their own narratives.

**Methods:** This qualitative study involved researchers applying a thematic analysis to online student blogs which documented their experiences as posted in the discussion forums. Recruitment resulted in a final dataset of 27 providing informed consent, representing a total 36% response rate.

**Results:** Several themes were identified, including: (a) a need for guidance regarding the shift from group work as assignments to teamwork as a workplace practice, (b) to further develop effective communication and technology skills, (c) learn more about productive time management and (d) further understand transitioning from student to practitioner.

**Conclusions:** This study affirmed that working virtually has a comparable capacity to foster positive, pre-professional identity and thinking more as a practitioner, despite the absence of a face-to-face setting.

**So what?:** Findings revealed (a) what educators can expect now that approaches to WIL have expanded, (b) how to prepare students for more diverse experiences in circumstances requiring sudden change and (c) how to reconfigure the curriculum and procedures to provide more supportive resources for students and agencies alike.

**KEYWORDS**
COVID-19, higher education, placements, reflective practice, work integrated learning

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Work Integrated Learning (WIL) placements within health degrees are naturally a highly desired experience. As a capstone unit, they give students who are about to graduate a real-world workplace experience, serving to not only help develop self-awareness of professional ability, but also offer the kind of mentoring that is essential for success.[1] The anticipation of engaging with authentic casework and projects is however often counterbalanced with anxiety relating to being prepared, such as having the right knowledge and capability, and being perceived as an effective part of a team.[2] Unlike clinically focused internships, health promotion placements are often more varied in scope and the multiple challenges require a broad set of skills as defined through core and cultural competencies.[3]

Students need to demonstrate they have acquired and can apply the specific core competencies in accordance with the universally accepted list detailed by the International Union of Health Promotion and Education (IUHPE), which "aims to equip graduates to be ethical and effective health promotion practitioners" (p.2).[3] This requires developing multiple skillsets which not only include planning, implementation and evaluation, but also extend to include other categories, such as communication and leadership. However, intellectual theories and frameworks examined throughout the trajectory of a degree take on new meaning when students need to apply relevant, practical skills and reflexivity to engage authentically with enabling health, advocacy and mediation demanded by real-life scenarios.[4] Even though it is important for students to feel completely prepared for this moment, such certitude can prove elusive when tackling health problems in situ for the first time as a professional.[2] To add to the complexity, the introduction and subsequent impact of COVID-19 disrupted all typical processes and approaches to placing students in agencies, along with their associated projects. There was an abrupt need to re-imagine the role of public health and health promotion practitioners, from the workplace to fieldwork.[5] Suddenly, health promotion efforts needed to be responsive in different ways, requiring daily re-evaluations of what to do and how to proceed.

COVID-19 radically changed the landscape. The definition of healthy settings had to be reconstructed in a world where social distancing was a new requirement.[6] The closing of non-essential services and the sudden isolation of working from home under various pressures gave rise to complex mental health concerns, along with relevant services being unable to respond effectively on such a large scale.[7] Further to this, the pandemic exacerbated health inequities and inequalities already experienced by marginalised groups, with some more negatively impacted than others.[8]

Concurrently, there was a background phenomenon defined by Klintman (2019) as "knowledge resistance", whereby some community members pushed back against many health initiatives, marked by frustration and non-compliance.[9] Van Den Brouk's (2020) observations rightly cite the significant and relevant role public health and health promotion efforts play at the individual, community and population health levels, particularly during a pandemic, and how they might "paradoxically be more important in this time of crisis than ever before" (p. 181).[10] The onus was on the sector to help facilitate changes in behaviours, such as wearing masks and adopting social distancing, communicating changing health messages clearly across communities, mitigating anxieties and ensuring policies were accepted, adopted and applied.

It was in this environment third-year placement students sought to apply their knowledge, aid organisations, and contribute to being part of the solution. However, from the beginning of 2020, the challenges were evident. Students were required to work from home the same as the rest of the workforce. This meant placements became virtual rather than located on site at an organisation. In addition, some students in the cohort had to undertake their virtual placement in teams, either with colleagues or agency staff.

For placement agency staff, lockdowns and working from home mandates meant those with supervisory roles had to readjust to managing individuals and teams remotely.[11] In some cases, the pressure of these accumulating unforeseen circumstances created a critical mass, whereby agencies who had previously held track records of partnerships and collaborations felt they needed to suspend placements until further notice. For universities, pressures were then centred on supporting students to complete their degree and still graduate with work-ready skillsets and professional capability.

Recent studies have examined both alternate and comparable university responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, often examining what needs to be implemented at the tertiary policy and curriculum levels.[12,13] Within this emerging field of research, however, there is scope for understanding more about the student experience amid the turmoil, and as a form of needs analysis, allow the findings to inform future initiatives that universities and educators could adopt. Some studies have commenced this work, usually obtaining data through survey formats[14-16] or as descriptive case studies.[17,18] However, little is known about how students experienced placement during the pandemic in their own words, in a grass-roots approach, for understanding what they went through and what kind of support they might subsequently need.

To this end, the present study investigated the lived experience and perceptions of undergraduate students from two separate trimester cohorts during their time on placement, with data sourced from narrative texts initiated by the students themselves and their own thematic analysis.

## 1.1 | Procedure

As part of a reflective practice, students were encouraged to blog throughout their placement and post on the unit's cloud site in the discussion forums, with a minimum of 10 blogs in total. It was suggested they comment on the barriers and enablers associated with their experiences during placement, and to also consider the shifts and changes within their skillsets and mindset that developed over time as a result. Caution was taken to ensure instructions were not too prescriptive so that students would not feel limited about potential content, and multiple resources were provided as further guidance and support.[19,20] In a departure from many work-integrated learning (WIL) reflective-practice exercises where students report on what they were asked to do, it was emphasised the focus was to be not so much on tasks per se, but the learning journey itself.

For their final assessment, students were taught and required to apply a thematic analysis[21,22] to their online posts and identify the most significant changes they experienced, and among those, which were the most meaningful to them.[23] Accordingly, it was of interest for the researchers to then apply the same thematic process across the cohort, using the students' assessments as data, to examine any common patterns or themes that identified key student needs and experiences during such an uncertain time. It was anticipated that outcomes could inform any necessary curriculum modifications or

resource development to support students, as well as providing insights about what they experienced amid the radical shifts in approach demanded by the pandemic. Specifically, the research team sought to examine the following research questions:

1. What were the principal changes experienced by the students during their placement?
2. What were the principal challenges?
3. Moving forward, what are the implications of the findings for future student support and placement development and delivery?

## 2 | METHODS

### 2.1 | Design

This study was a qualitative descriptive design,[24] where researchers applied a thematic analysis to student assessments in the final year of their degree.

### 2.2 | Sample

Purposive sampling of students from an undergraduate health unit focused on placements formed the basis of recruitment which occurred at the end of trimesters one and two during 2020, following ethics approval (HEAG-H 154). Information, plain language and consent forms were provided by a REDCap online link through the unit's dedicated cloud site. This occurred once the relevant assessment task used for data had been marked and feedback made available. Students were assured all submissions would be anonymous and that researchers conducting the analysis would only have access to de-identified data. It was also explained to students there were no negative repercussions from not participating or choosing to withdraw.

A subset of all students from trimester one (N = 49) and trimester two (N = 25) provided informed consent, resulting in a final dataset of 27, representing a total 36% response rate. For qualitative studies, sample size remains a contentious issue. One review has reported[25] single case studies should generally contain 15 to 30 interviews, whereas other researchers[22,26] suggest 10-50 for participant-generated text, not only pointing to the variance reflected in qualitative studies, but also providing some useful guidelines. Based on these recommendations, data from 27 participants was considered sufficient to generate saturation of themes.[27]

### 2.3 | Analysis

Given students conducted a thematic analysis when considering their weekly posts over time, the researchers subsequently applied the same method when analysing the full dataset. Essentially, steps included: (a) immersion in the data, (b) generating codes, (c) searching for and reviewing themes, (d) defining and naming the themes, followed by (e) generating the resulting report.

Although one of the two researchers had taught into the unit, a research assistant collated and de-identified the data, and therefore those analysing it were blinded to who had provided consent. Further rigour was applied through several initiatives. First, a hermeneutic circle process was enlisted whereby data were considered within individual data and also across the cohort. As noted by Crist (2003), "within the circular process, narratives are examined simultaneously with the emerging interpretation, never losing sight of each informant's particular story and context" (p. 203).[28] Second, researchers were cognizant of preconceived notions and self-identified biases throughout the analytic process as a form of bracketing to prevent skewing the analysis.[29] Third, those analysing the data compared their themes and approach as a form of inter-rater reliability,[30] to affirm findings and avoid the pitfalls Braun and Clarke (2006) describe (p. 94).[31]

Accordingly, the principal themes are presented below.

## 3 | RESULTS

Six key themes permeated the dataset, dominated by the influence of COVID-19 and the adjustments that had to be made to accommodate the subsequent series of unexpected disruptions.

### 3.1 | The wake of covid-19

With the onset of COVID-19 and realising projects would change from located to virtual placements, most students experienced a trajectory of initial disappointment, followed by being overwhelmed, through to ultimate acceptance. In time they were able to re-frame the disappointment and start to see how it upskilled them in different and unexpected ways, although this outcome was not obvious at the beginning. Further to working on different projects to what they anticipated, with the introduction of government restrictions, students commented that working from home often felt confining. This was due to not being part of a real-world workplace setting, or seeing what other people were doing and the inability to connect and get to know the other workers and their roles. As one student commented, "… not being able to leave the house other than the essential reasons outlined by the government was hard. It was difficult to focus at times being in the same environment and being in front of a computer for majority of the day" (#9).

Many stated their contact was contained to the supervisor alone, who was typically busy grappling with organisational problems of their own. Reflecting on one of their early online posts, one student wrote, "Doing a practicum during this pandemic is a sobering reminder of the need to perform in a workplace, to demonstrate your worth to the business/ organisation whilst being flexible and acting in the best interests of others; a delicate and difficult balance to achieve" (#18).

Over time, students were surprised how the anxiety of unmet expectations evolved into new learning outcomes through statements such as, "I also came to the realisation while I was disappointed that my practicum was taking place in my home I was still gaining valuable experience" (#12). This insight was shared by many. As one student wrote:

> "Although I felt uneasy in the beginning, I am thrilled and proud of myself for overcoming the change and the fear about how the alternative was going to work. Change or the fear of the unknown can sometimes be better than initially anticipated, allowing individuals and organisations to learn new skills, evaluate new opportunities and exercise creativity" (#5).

Many began to acknowledge they had been limited by their own definition of what placement is and what it requires, with comments such as, "what I had learnt had changed not only my knowledge and skill base, but also the way I thought about what a job in public health involved," and "I realised that change is always happening, and you have to be on the lookout for new trends that are going to affect your work. You are going to be in a much better position if you see the change early, and adapt to it, rather than if it catches you by surprise" (#17).

One student made a practical suggestion for integrating change: "I can procrastinate and worry about the details however I have realised now it is important to just start" (#12).

## 3.2 | The transition from apprehension to empowerment

The most dominant and meaningful change experienced by the students was the growth in personal and professional confidence. This did not happen in a vacuum, however, and there were several mechanisms driving these shifts. Changes happened when students realised the potential impact of their project and the power of its outcomes, such as, "I began to adhere to a more positive outlook on the project and see that it is much more than a group assignment" (#13) and "not only did my abilities change through learning new skills throughout the course of my placement in a range of different aspects, but so did my mindset" (#8).

Another mechanism for increasing confidence arose from the combination of reflexivity combined with positive supervisor feedback. Initial struggles were defined by "lack of experience", "performance anxiety", "feeling out of my league" and that "feelings of being overwhelmed, frustrated and hopeless … stemmed from self-doubting" (#15); all of which contributed to self-imposed demands of anxiety and pressure. These feelings subsided when supportive comments from supervisors were provided along the way.

Students identified flexibility, persistence and self-discipline as key. One student wrote, "I learnt to change my learning styles. I had

to mould myself to the new norm which was having the on-field experience online. What changed in me was that I was able to go with the flow and unprecedented circumstance. This change in strategy boosted my self-belief and instilled self-efficacy" (#16). Another observed, "what materialized by week 10 was a determined, more confident, and capable practitioner, who had arrived at her destination by performing and trusting in the process" (#20).

Sometimes the shift from uncertainty to increased confidence translated into employment offers:

> "I experienced concerns that I had some skill gaps, such as knowledge of specific software, and oral communication skills, due to my previous career being quite specialist and technology-free. … In blog ten I refer to my increasing confidence and highlight the positive effect that feeling like I now have some experience and skills to offer. I also note … the networking involved in this internship had given me enough confidence to approach a clinical nutritionist with my CV, who then offered me an ongoing paid role and mentorship" (#3).

## 3.3 | The transition from student to practitioner

As students began contemplating the importance of what their projects demanded and their own role and contribution, they realised they could not apply student thinking to workplace practice. As one student wrote, "I spent time worrying about the task when I wasn't doing it, as I knew I was doing this for another organisation, not just a grade" (#11). Shifts in mindset became apparent:

> "In the beginning I lacked the ability to see myself as a capable health professional. Early in my placement I constantly sought approval for my work, celebrating each victory measured by the presence of positive feedback. However, in week six I begin to celebrate my ability to complete each task as a capable health professional. This self-confidence is essential to continue to forward and learn beyond the university setting" (#23).

Instead of concern about a lack of skills, the increased confidence students were experiencing led them to appreciate the knowledge and understanding they had accumulated throughout their degree, and how they could contribute in meaningful ways. As one student observed, "my practicum experience has provided me with valuable tools for my personal and professional life going forward. These tools have allowed me to become less reliant on other people's opinions and to trust my own instinct and judgements and to believe in myself." They added, "I have learnt I can contribute useful knowledge; I am resourceful and have the ability to know where to find the relevant content for contribution to a project" (#22).

## 3.4 | Teamwork

Students initially struggled with negotiating teamwork in an online environment. As time progressed, they found ways to create strategies and identify their own best-practice. As one student noted, "at the beginning I was not sure if I would gain much from undertaking this placement—however, in the end I gained valuable experience in working in groups, working online, conducting process evaluation and using platforms such as zoom and MS teams." They added, "while it was not initially what I expected my placement experience to look like, in the end it was a rewarding learning experience" (#12).

One student stated the key to successful teamwork was being proactive in meetings rather than passive. They wrote, "I resolved that in future I will always make a contribution at a team meeting, and later reflect on the effectiveness of my contribution" (#17). This became easier for students as their confidence increased. In some cases, group work itself became the catalyst for growth: "I built up confidence in using my voice and speaking my mind" (#4).

Ultimately students began to also appreciate broader skills of conflict resolution:

> "'My biggest 'light-bulb' moment has come from acknowledging and accepting that there will always be differences in opinions, perspectives and how we approach our jobs, especially working in a multi-disciplinary team, and that this is okay. Acknowledgment and acceptance of these differences will make it easier for me to deal with conflict in future team settings" (#20).

## 3.5 | Communication

Students also grappled with communication skills, mostly due to the unfamiliarity of the online environment and how to work with it in the most effective way. Many found that a useful strategy was consistent, regular communication and video calls. As such, one student noted, "communication was a great strength within my team which lead to reassurance and resilience" (#13).

For some, the direct nature of online communication was positive in unexpected ways:

> "I was able to form a deeper and far more meaningful bond with my supervisor. Organising zoom meetings with her got more comfortable each time and I was able to openly share my thoughts, feelings and ask questions in areas in which I was not sure of, hence, these communications allowed me to develop and improve my personal communication skills which was one of my weaknesses" (#2).

However, these kinds of positive outcomes were not achieved when technology proved to be too challenging, as in the case of poor internet service or steep learning curves with managing various platforms. One student wrote, "Although I aimed to take some form of leadership in helping those struggling with communicating in the online platform, it did prove to be difficult at times" (#5).

## 3.6 | Time management versus motivation

In the early stages, the uncertainty of how to function effectively when working from home amid distractions posed specific challenges for meeting deadlines. For some, not knowing how to interpret the scope of a project, as well as feelings of being isolated and overwhelmed, translated into decreased motivation. Once again, students quickly identified they needed to create their own strategies for success, given the need to complete tasks on time.

Many comments were made regarding the complexity of these issues, such as, "At the beginning I thought 'I don't want to do this, I've never done it before' and my motivation to do it was low. But once I changed my attitude, it presented itself as an opportunity. An opportunity to learn new writing skills and develop my skills that can be used in the future" (#14). Another wrote:

> "I realised that not having a work structure which was organised and consistent prevented me from performing to the best of my abilities. There was a common pattern of struggling to 'manage my time' and not knowing how to prioritise and plan the project. Therefore, having observed the high level of organization from other group members I was influenced to change my work structure and improve my planning skills" (#4).

Over time, learning to appreciate what they brought to the project and the significance of each contribution also helped to improve perceived difficulties: "Slowly my motivation began to change as I was beginning to understand the importance of this topic" (#14). Ultimately, students identified the benefits of taking control and not allowing unfamiliarity to dictate outcomes. As one student noted, "over the placement period, my time management skills undeniably improved, meaning stress levels reduced and work ethic improved" (#15).

## 4 | DISCUSSION

Examining outcomes from the student data identified several key challenges associated with implementing virtual placements, as well as describing the changes over time that occur generally throughout such practicums as part of the learning process. In terms of changes, students suddenly had to reframe their expectations and try to adjust to new forms of self-determined workplace practices they had not previously encountered. Therefore, it was interesting to note that students soon devised a series of strategies, independently and

collaboratively, to manage successful completion of their placement. It has been reported how virtual placements are a natural choice in a world where technology continues to exponentially develop,[32,33] so it is valuable to examine what students encountered in these circumstances and what might subsequently constitute best-practice.

First, they learned to be flexible and knew they had to be responsive to changing and evolving circumstances. As part of this, they needed to redefine what they believed placements to be and what they involved. The initial frustration, uncertainty, worry and difficulty with managing change related to COVID-19 led to discovering that adapting to new circumstances was an overall positive experience in new skill development and adaptability. As a result, it could be seen virtual placements still offer valid and valuable learning experiences. Within the virtual placement model then, it became necessary for students to identify what worked best, individually, and collectively. As Dean and Campbell (2020) noted, "now that we are in the post-COVID19 emergency, it is time to focus on alternative approaches to work and how to leverage technology to enable partnerships and support students in authentic working roles" (p. 360).[18]

Second, data further affirmed that virtual placements have the capacity to foster a positive pre-professional identity.[34] Rather than adhering to a student mindset, most realised the importance of thinking as a practitioner. For example, students had to reconsider their approach and recognise that working in a group did not equate to the dynamics or expectations of a group assignment. There is no grade. Similarly, project management is daunting if in the past it has only involved submitting assignments on time. More is required, and many students noted being surprised and appreciative of the opportunity to expand their knowledge and applied new skills in practical ways.

Shifts to increased confidence were strongly influenced by the students' reflexivity within their weekly posts, allowing them to become increasingly aware of their improvements, as well as the supportive feedback provided by the supervisor. Some researchers have even recommended students be proactive in that regard and actively seek feedback that is meaningful.[35] Students who were fearless in discussing knowledge gaps with their supervisor appeared to attain the most significant gains in personal and professional development. Knowing the importance of any given project, as well as the student's contribution and the positive outcomes associated with it, all served to boost confidence and capability.

Naturally, these changes also embedded associated challenges, articulated by the student posts throughout placement. Many cited initial struggles with teamwork to be one of the greatest logistical challenges, possibly due to the student versus practitioner mindset. As an antidote, many created personal strategies for successfully negotiating new technology and team dynamics in an online environment. Students acknowledged the pivotal role of communication in this regard. Many learned to be proactive leaders in the process, as opposed to being a follower with limited contribution to group decisions, corresponding to the increased levels in confidence and agency. The emergence of increased technology use could be one of the hallmarks of new WIL virtual-placement models, and therefore

examining how students can maximise technological skills will warrant further investigation. As one study noted, "enabling technologies assumes a role in the provision of WIL greater than we could ever have expected, and certainly greater than tertiary institutions had prepared for".[18]

For those seeking to specialise in health promotion, it could be seen that students therefore developed skills aligned with IHUPE's core competencies. For example, communication performance criteria require "using a range of skills for health promotion action, including written, verbal, non-verbal, listening, presentation and groupwork facilitation skills. A working knowledge of the use of information technology and electronic media is also required" (p.13). As stated above, data revealed how all these elements needed to be reimagined when working remotely, and how over time, students managed to reflect on ways to address each effectively, which often translated into replacing old, habitual approaches with new, creative strategies. Many reported increased self-efficacy as a result.

Students require extensive guidance and support when embarking on virtual placements.[32] Knowing what students experienced during COVID-19 helps inform and tailor curriculum delivery, whereby students can anticipate the pros and cons and know what to expect. The processes students adopted to counter the multiple difficulties can be shared and discussed with each new student cohort. Supervisors should also be made aware of the power of their feedback, and how it can influence student development in the long term. Ultimately, it should be stressed that students arrived at their own conclusions about what strategies would work best for them at every stage, based on reflection and in the absence of specific instruction, demonstrating their innate resilience and tenacity. It is reassuring for educators to know that such students are not only work-ready, but also world-ready.

In terms of limitations, it could be argued that students provided insights to appease the marker; however, students were graded on their ability to conduct a thematic analysis of their experiences, not the content of individual or collective online posts. Coercion can be a problem in student studies, and this was minimised through the use of a non-teaching, independent research assistant collecting and de-identifying data. Furthermore, findings were limited to an undergraduate cohort, and therefore studies examining outcomes from postgraduate students are of interest. In terms of strengths, the study identified that virtual practicums have an equivalent capacity to provide authentic and meaningful experiences and opportunities to reflect, grow and develop in ways comparable to located versions. When COVID-19 first emerged, it was assumed by many that this would not be the case.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

The present study identified multiple factors to consider when implementing virtual student placements, derived from student perspectives. As such, the data suggested practicum students were challenged in specific ways during the pandemic, and needed to be

coached to (a) understand how to transition to a practitioner mindset in an online environment, (b) develop a meaningful skillset that included effective team and time management, and (c) be guided to create helpful communication strategies. When these challenges are addressed, data suggested corresponding core health promotion competencies are developed and further strengthened as a result. Future studies triangulating supervisor insights with student experiences are encouraged.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

This submission has no conflicting interests and is the original work of the authors.

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