Projects, Placements and Participation:
The Art Industry Internship Program

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In 2003, the South Australian School of Art (SASA) *Art Industry Internship Program* was introduced as a pilot study enabling seven students to undertake industry placements. Expanded in 2004 with a doubling of student numbers and a corresponding increase in host organisations, the *Art Industry Internship Program* offers honours and final year undergraduate students the opportunity to undertake a placement with an arts organization or business. This paper, in giving an account of the SASA *Arts Industry Internship Program,* will consider the range and diversity of internships, the differences between formal and informal placements and evaluation methods and employment outcomes. It will acknowledge the obvious benefits to students in providing them with vocational experience while also raising concerns regarding the influence of the market[1] and the increasing focus on career development within university-based art schools.

The growing significance of the market in tertiary art education can be illustrated by the following anecdote. In a recent *Internship Program* seminar, students were asked to identify gaps in their education. Without hesitation they all nominated, as lacking from the school curriculum, a course or topic on marketing and self-promotion.[2] As marketing and promotion bring to mind spin, packaging and product endorsement, I was initially taken aback with the students' response[3]. Yet, at the same time, I had to admit that the *Internship Program* itself belonged to a category of knowledge that, like marketing and promotion, is focused on professional development.

The students' request, however, seemed to crystallise a shift in pedagogical priorities from the study of art (its practices, histories and theories) to the acquisition of career-based knowledge and skills. In the SASA this is reflected not only in the prioritising of new vocational courses over theory-based electives but is evident across a range of art school activities that encourage students to adopt a careerist/entrepreneurial focus at a very early stage in their undergraduate course (for example, the

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[1] I have followed Peter Timms' example by using the market as a broad umbrella term referring to 'a complex network of organisations' inclusive of commercial galleries, publicly funded museums, contemporary art spaces, art fairs, art auction houses, art magazines, government art agencies and arts organisations that promote the arts'. (Timms, 2004:49)
[2] It is worth noting that the students' perception of this as a lack is borne out by overseas research identifying the importance of promotional skills for artists and craftspeople operating in a competitive market economy, and as a much neglected part of their art school training. (Harvey & Blackwell, 1999)
[3] Others have also been surprised by the career focus of young artists. See for example Daniel Thomas' article in *Artlink.* (Thomas, 2006:24)

increase in undergraduate exhibitions, the shifting of the *Professional Practice* course to an earlier stage in the undergraduate degree, and the setting of mock grant applications as assignments.)

The preceding anecdote highlights not only the incursion of the market into art education but also my own ambivalence. On the one hand, I am generally supportive of vocational measures, but on the other hand, critical of the impact that this and other market driven initiatives exert on the art school in general. This is particularly so when these developments reduce the availability of existing course electives and/or give no room for accompanying commentary or critique. This paper, therefore, emerges from my experience in developing and coordinating the *Internship Program* and is framed by ambivalence: an ambivalence that stems from the tension in tertiary art education between academic knowledge and the development of vocational skills. Awareness of these competing objectives may help ensure that a balanced curriculum is maintained and that expansion in one area isn't at the expense of another.

In her thoughtful and prescient paper, 'The Disciplining of Art Theory', Rosemary Hawker raises similar concerns (ACUADS 2002). Hawker's paper addresses the pressure on art theory courses to be discipline-specific whereas this paper points to the tendency of professional development courses to replace theory electives. Both papers identify a shift away from courses that investigate or theorise art in favour of more vocational or utilitarian courses. Significantly, this trend appears to be more advanced at the Queensland College of Art (and is suggestive of a general tendency) where courses on marketing and promotion already exist. These disciplines, as yet, are not included in the SASA curriculum, but student attraction to them sparked my interest and was in part the impetus for this paper.

Ambivalence

According to Zygmunt Bauman, ambivalence is the condition of postmodernity: the waste product of modernity's project to establish order (Bauman, 1991:15). Whereas modernism promised but was unable to deliver a world of security and certainty, (Bauman, 1991:4) postmodernism offers no such guarantees, no predictable outcomes, no fixed meaning. Instead, the postmodern world is experienced as 'disjointed, fragmented, ambiguous and confusing'. (Smith, 1999:130) Postmodernism means 'constant exposure to ambivalence, that is a situation with no foolproof choice, no reflective knowledge of 'how to go on' (Bauman, 1991:244-5). With the loss of authoritative frameworks it is left up to each individual to make sense of the world and their place within it. (Bauman, 1991:197) Experts may provide assistance but their advice is often contrary, the clarity of the solutions offered mask contradiction, and trust and purpose remain elusive (Bauman, 1991:199). Hence, life is experienced as a series of dilemmas or crises (Bauman, 1991:212).

Ambivalence, as one of the main afflictions of our time (Bauman, 1991:15) is not therefore unique to the art school experience. Indeed, almost twenty years ago, K. M. Harmon identified cultural ambivalence as a characteristic of the contemporary university experience claiming that 'the dual

and oft conflicting cultures of academia and the practicing professions create tensions for many academics in university professional schools' (Harmon, 1989:491).

Ambivalence, a term generally used pejoratively, refers to the existence of conflicting feelings towards a common object or goal (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ambivalence). Conflicting emotions, contradictory impulses can lead to indecision or inertia. The bind of ambivalence, therefore, is that it can halt action or block change. This needs to be overcome in order to proceed or continue with a course of action. Viewed more positively, however, ambivalence can be used creatively; for as a halt to action, a brake on movement it can provide a space for reflection. So, one advantage of postmodern ambivalence is that it gives pause for thought.

Thus ambivalence, rather than being brushed aside, can be put to work opening a space in which to reflect on the *Internship Program*: its methods and practices and its role within the art school curriculum. Foregrounding ambivalence also gives rise to other concerns such as the impact of vocational and market-driven initiatives on the art school curriculum in general. Therefore, this report on the *Internship Program* is placed within this context and framed by the sense of ambivalence generated by these developments.

The Art Industry Internship Program

The Internship Program enables students to undertake a placement with a gallery, arts organisation or institution for a specified period of time. It is undertaken as a semester unit with the student committing at least 72 hours to the host organisation and is normally taken within a four to eight week block comprising of one to two days per week. The aim of the internship is for students to gain vocational experience and an enhanced understanding of the arts industry while undertaking work that is of value to the host organisation. The range of host organisations include contemporary art spaces, commercial galleries, local councils, arts and community based organisations, design businesses, a national art magazine and artists studios. This year's host organisations also include the South Australian Museum, a national health conference and a visual arts festival.

The *Internship Program* is based on similar programs that operate within the University of South Australia (UniSA) and at other universities and overseas arts organisations. Prior to this the school had accommodated occasional, informal student-initiated placements. In contrast, the SASA *Internship Program* is organised by the supervising lecturer /coordinator. The student is consulted regarding their preferences or field of interest, but isn't required to organise the placement. The placement therefore doesn't depend on the student's prior knowledge, art world contacts or initial confidence, so students who may be less outgoing or lack confidence and the right contacts are not disadvantaged.

The following factors distinguish the *Internship Program* from 'merely' work experience and reinforce its educational status, these are:

First, the *Internship Program* includes a series of introductory and concluding seminars that build upon, rather than reiterate, knowledge gained from *Professional Practice*. As part of the seminars, students undertake initial research into the structure, function and operations of their host organisation and consult course readings. The readings include information on cultural policy directions, cultural development, the arts industry and related issues such as funding, promoting the arts and workplace skills. Students are encouraged to analyse and critically evaluate the material. The seminars foster a collaborative learning environment encouraging students to share information and critically engage with issues relevant to the intern experience.

Second, the *Internship Program* has a double focus. In the first instance, this is to gain first hand experience of the function and operation of a contemporary art organisation or institution. The second goal is to undertake a specific research task or project that is of benefit both to the student and to the host organisation. The project or task/s is determined by the host institution and the academic supervisor. Every effort is made to match projects and hosts with students' interests and preferences. The advantage of this double focus for the student is that the work experience factor is enhanced by the acquisition of specific knowledge or skills. The value for the host organisation is that the student's work serves a specific purpose, beyond the rather nebulous notion of 'an extra pair of hands'.

Finally, on completion of the placement, students produce a report on their research or project. Students therefore acquire an additional skill – that of report writing. This knowledge is desirable for a range of vocational contexts such as art administration, community cultural development, grant acquittal and consultancy work. Copies of the report are provided to the host organisation (thereby verifying their role as education providers), the school and the university library. Assessment is based on the placement project proposal, the report and a written evaluation of the intern's performance by the host organization.

The internship, while belonging to the category of professional and career development also provides a forum for the consideration of any ethical, critical or aesthetic issues. At the same time, student reports develop research and writing skills and encourage students to reflect on the benefits of the program to themselves and their host organisations. The *Internship Program* therefore combines both vocational and academic pedagogical imperatives. It provides them with first hand experience of the arts industry: they gain valuable work experience, acquire a range of skills not generally available to them via other means within the school and, most importantly, develop an understanding of the diversity of the professional art field.

Evaluation and Employment Outcomes

That students found the internship to be a rewarding experience is borne out by comments such as: 'The work placement has been possibly the most beneficial thing I have done. It has given me my first taste of real world experience and I have learnt and gained much' and '…I found the

experience incredibly rewarding and learnt an enormous amount about what it means to actually practice community cultural development' (Course Evaluation Instrument 2004/5).

The internship also has benefits for the host organisations, as interns assist with the day-to-day work of the organisation and carry out specific tasks or research projects that are of value to the organisation. The range of projects that have been undertaken include exhibition research and development, audience profiling, auction fundraisers, developing data bases, developing condition reports for public artworks, developing archival systems for both text-based and visual material, producing gallery policy documents, assisting in an art therapy unit, assisting in a photography studio, gallery assistant and researching community art practices and public art in South Australia.

Host organisations have responded positively to the program[4] consistently rating the students' contributions as 'outstanding [and] of a high professional standard' (Carclew, 2005). Thus the *Internship Program* enhances SASA's reputation by demonstrating the school's adherence to a high standard of education and by the quality of its graduates. The *Internship Program* also benefits the school by developing and maintaining relationships with the host organisations, thus strengthening the school's industry relationships. An unanticipated, but interesting, outcome of the program is that some student projects have identified particular gaps or industry needs which point to opportunities for future school/industry partnerships or consultancy work.

While it is clear that there the *Internship Program* provides obvious benefits for the students, the school and the host organisations, as a vocational course it's also important to evaluate it in terms of employment outcomes for students. To date there has been no study tracking the employment of SASA graduates, so any evaluation of the *Internship Program* in terms of improving graduate employment outcomes in the visual arts and crafts, can only be speculative. Nevertheless, overseas research does indicate that this is a likely outcome: for example A. Blackwell *et al* in their survey of British art and design graduates found that 'respondents who had undertaken a work experience placement had higher rates of full-time permanent employment after graduation' (Blackwell *et al*, 2001:278).

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[4] The following comments from host organisations' assessments indicates how highly the students were rated:
'… demonstrated that she is extremely capable of working autonomously and collaboratively and importantly, being able to determine when to seek information or assistance from others and when to work independently. This enabled her to successfully fulfil two projects during her internship.'
'… send another one like her.'
'… has done way more than the internship (required) and been of amazing help to us. While she has been here, she has offered much. We wish her well.'
'… has very quickly developed a sound basis for understanding publicity/gallery admin/and fundraising at a professional level.'
'… impressed by the breadth and depth of the thought that she put into her preliminary planning. I remained impressed by her professionalism, her diligence, her respect for others and by the ease with which she fitted into the art therapy department.'
'… can we have another one like her please?'

Anecdotal evidence suggests that internship students have received casual or short-term work as a direct outcome of their placements. For example, in 2003 three of seven students from the internship pilot study received some form of employment (casual or short term contract work) from their host organisation. In a magazine report on a UniSA Alumni award winner, the student credited her internship experience with leading to later employment and giving 'her an opportunity to map out another side of the arts industry' (Masters, 2004). In the following two years, four students were paid to complete projects that extended beyond the scheduled time-frame for the placement, with one student invited to apply for further work. Two students who undertook placements in galleries were offered occasional paid work to assist with gallery functions. One host organisation applied for funding in order to employ their intern student for the following year. Another student has received ongoing part-time work from her host organisation.

Immediate employment, however, is not the only yardstick for measuring the success of the *Internship Program*, for another important aspect of the program is career development. This assists students to clarify their vocational interests. For example, after undertaking a gallery placement in 2003, one student decided to embark on a Graduate Diploma in Arts Management (UniSA) in 2004 and has since found full-time employment in arts administration. Two students who were introduced to community cultural development via their placements have decided to pursue a career in this field. It is difficult to draw any conclusions from such numerically small examples and further research is needed, nevertheless it's clear that the internship program broadens students' conception of professional employment and prepares them for participation within a range of industry contexts.

To return to my initial anecdote: the students' desire for information on marketing prompted me to view the *Internship Program* as not simply vocational but as part of a broader pedagogical trend, shifting the focus from art to career development. I therefore saw the *Internship Program* as an 'ambivalent object', consigned to more than one category: the category of education for social improvement (morally good) and the category of education driven by market imperatives (morally doubtful). Ambivalence causes indecision about how to proceed, 'how to go on' (Bauman, 1991:243): progress therefore, becomes stalled. But in calling a halt to movement, ambivalence also opened a space for reflecting on the *Internship Program*.

 By reassessing the program, I was able to conclude that three aspects of it - the seminar series, the project focus and the report - balanced the vocational aspect of the course by focusing on research, scholarship, written communication and critical and ethical issues pertaining to the arts industry. With the rapid expansion of art's knowledge base competing interests, values and priorities must be accommodated within the syllabus; nevertheless, it's important to be wary of eroding academic content in order to meet vocational needs. Awareness of these issues and sensitivity to the emergence of possible tensions or conflicts is needed to ensure that the art school curriculum remains balanced, relevant and coherent.

Reflection also enabled consideration of the market's relationship to the curriculum. There is strong support for the view that the market exerts an undue and even negative influence on art (Timms, 2004:49) but claiming the moral high ground while neglecting to include it in the curriculum will only disadvantage students. Students need to be equipped for life after art school and, in order 'to work in the world (as distinct from being 'worked out and worked by' it) one needs to know how the world works' (Bauman, 2000:212). Including marketing (or any other career-based subject) in the school curriculum isn't automatically an unqualified endorsement of it. Indeed, any of the techniques and practices of professional development should be accompanied by contextual information and critical reflection, for only by exposing students to diverse approaches and positions can we expect them to make informed career and life choices.

As lecturers (and perhaps more so as art history/theory lecturers) we might resent this 'market creep' onto our turf. But can it be avoided? At a time when universities are under scrutiny in terms of the vocational relevance of their courses, when the curriculum is increasingly being driven by student/consumer choice and when the art industry demands recent graduates be skilled in the art of self-promotion and publicity, to expect art schools to resist the pressure of an industry-orientated education system is unrealistic. Nevertheless, these developments do raise questions that need to be addressed such as, what is lost in the push for industry relevance? What should be the balance between art as the subject of study and art as a career? And where should professional development courses be located? As neither theory nor studio practice, they often occupy the awkward and ambiguous space between art theory and the studio disciplines or shuttle back and forth between the two.

Ambivalence may be 'a situation that has no decidable solution' (Bauman, 1991:244) but 'taking distance, taking time' (Bauman, 2000:210) enabled me to rethink the relationship between art education and industry, to reconsider student needs, and to reflect on the *Internship Program* within the context of a multi-purpose contemporary art school. Perhaps this is how reconciliation with ambivalence is arrived at, by using the space it creates to reflect and to question and thereby transforming oscillation into opportunity.

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