



Community Engagement is optional until it isn't: Rethinking postgraduate psychology placements

From transactional to transformational: Co-designing WIL with community partners

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Abstract

Universities want placements filled, students want them completed, and community partners are left to reconcile a mismatch no one asked them to navigate. This practice-informed provocation draws on work-integrated learning (WIL) scholarship and my experience as placement coordinator to argue that community engagement is often raised as a value in psychology placements but insufficiently embedded in placement infrastructure. Community engagement may appear in program rationales and accreditation documents but rarely in the structural design of how placements are resourced and supported. In other words, there is a gap between what we say about community engagement and what we build into our placement systems (Jackson et al., 2017). Based on my experience, I argue that community partners are often positioned as hosts rather than co-designers of professional learning, left carrying substantial, under-recognised responsibility for student learning. Postgraduate psychology placements cannot be ethically scaled through transactional placement models. If universities want community partners to sustain student learning, they must resource relational co-design as core placement infrastructure, rather than treat it as optional engagement work.

Keywords

postgraduate psychology placements, co-design, transactional placement, relational duality, performative learning, coordinator capacity, relational infrastructure

The scaling problem

Postgraduate psychology enrolments have grown substantially, driven by genuine demand for mental health services, but placement infrastructure has not kept pace. The capacity to expand postgraduate training remains constrained by the availability of placements, supervision and other resource-intensive components of professional education (Australian Psychological Society, 2025; Jackson et al., 2017). In my experience, these pressures are particularly visible in areas, where students from multiple universities compete for placements within the same limited pool of host organisations. Universities therefore rely heavily on the goodwill and professional commitment of existing placement

providers. Some organisations continue to host students out of professional obligation, even when the arrangements offer them limited reciprocal value. This reflects broader concerns in the literature about WIL shifting responsibility and cost onto host organisations (McDonald & Grant-Smith, 2020).

Partners as hosts, not co-designers

The assumption that community organisations are ready and willing pedagogical partners is often a polite fiction. Evidence points to substantial variation in employer preparedness and capacity to support WIL (Jackson et al., 2017; Jackson, 2015) while broader critiques highlight the shifting of responsibility and unrecognised burden placed on host organisations when placements are poorly designed (McDonald & Grant-Smith, 2020). What is missing is what I term relational duality: a mutual, ongoing negotiation of learning goals and organisational objectives, where both parties contribute to and shape the arrangement rather than one side effectively dictating the terms. I draw this as an analytic framing from practice, informed by Billett's (2015) account of workplace curriculum as co-constructed rather than delivered. Without relational duality, the community organisation becomes a setting rather than a partner, and the student becomes a visitor rather than a practitioner in formation (Billett, 2015).

The consequences for all stakeholders

These conditions produce what I term performative learning: placements structured around logistical completion such as hours logged and competencies ticked off. Students learn to perform the appearance of professional readiness rather than developing the situated judgment real-world practice demands (Kilminster & Jolly, 2000). Equally serious is partner attrition; the quiet withdrawal of host organisations that happens gradually, without formal process, as administrative burden outweighs benefit. Each withdrawal concentrates demand on remaining partners and deepens the pressures that made the arrangement unsustainable.

Enos and Morton (2003) distinguish between transactional and transformational community engagement. Transactional engagement places students in organisations; transformational engagement builds genuine reciprocity so that both the institution and the community are changed by the relationship. In my experience, psychology placements often remain transactional, designed to be convenient for universities and often useful for community partners only incidentally. Genuine partnership requires asking not only whether an organisation can host a student, but what the organisation needs, what value the placement creates, and how the partner shapes the placement (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002).

This shift toward co-design does not require dismantling existing systems. Critically, it requires honesty about suitability as the pressure to fill placement quotas should never override the professional judgement that ethical co-design demands. This is not simply about adding more engagement activities, but about resourcing the conditions under which engagement can be meaningful. Coordinator workload and program scale are foundational as they determine whether relational co-design is possible at all. Partner forums, pre-placement consultation, and structured feedback processes are enabling mechanisms; they give practical form to partnership, but only when institutions have the capacity and willingness to respond to what partners say.

Foundations for co-design: responsible scaling and coordinator capacity

Underpinning these tensions is a deeply undervalued resource: the workload of the placement coordinator. In some postgraduate psychology programs, a single coordinator may be responsible for over a hundred placements, leaving little structural capacity for the relational work genuine community engagement requires. When coordinators are stretched thin, placements default to

logistics: filling slots, tracking hours, troubleshooting crises. Site visits become rare or reactive, partner meetings collapse into status updates, and opportunities for mutual learning between university and community partners are lost. Responsible scaling means aligning student numbers with partner capacity, supervision quality and coordinator time required to sustain relational co-design (see Miller, 2024). The relational work, essential to ethical WIL, including co-designing learning objectives, negotiating expectations, calibrating supervision quality, and aligning student preparation with local practice realities, requires protected time. Coordinator capacity is therefore not an administrative luxury, but a precondition for ethical WIL.

Enabling mechanisms for co-design: relational infrastructure

Co-design does not occur simply because stakeholders are invited to participate. As a form of co-creation, it requires stakeholders to actively contribute to design processes by drawing on diverse experiences and expertise (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). I use the term relational infrastructure to describe sustained relationships (regular forums), communication mechanisms (pre-placement consultation identifying needs), and institutional capacity that enables community partners to shape placement design over time (feedback loops) – the essential enabling mechanisms for ethical WIL. In placement education, meaningful co-design extends beyond episodic consultation and relies on sustained relationships that enable ongoing dialogue, trust building and reciprocal influence between universities and community partners as described by Bringle and Hatcher (2002) and Enos and Morten (2003).

This provocation is addressed primarily to psychology program directors and accreditation bodies as they hold the levers that matter most. Community engagement in WIL is not a feature to be added when conditions are favourable. It is the condition under which meaningful professional formation becomes possible. The question is not whether psychology programs should take co-design seriously; it is whether institutions are willing to resource, support and sustain the relational infrastructure needed to offer WIL as a genuine opportunity to connect academic learning with real-world practice in ways that is impactful and ethical.

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Statement on the use of Artificial Intelligence

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