

Equity Frontiers Trial Protocol

“The impact of financial aid and preparedness training on students’ engagement, progression and wellbeing during unpaid practicum placements: A parallel trial”

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1. Trial overview

Trial title:	The impact of financial aid and preparedness training on students' engagement, progression and wellbeing during unpaid practicum placements: A parallel trial.		
Trial start date:	06/06/2024		31/08/2025
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Sponsor:	The University of Notre Dame Australia and the Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success		
Trial summary:	Unpaid practicum placements put significant financial and non-financial pressures on students in higher education, and compounds the challenges already faced by students from equity cohorts. Our trial evaluates and compares two interventions intended to alleviate these pressures: a financial support payment and an online educational module designed to prepare students for the challenges that come with placements. These interventions are expected to have positive effects on student participation, retention, experience, and wellbeing.		
Funding (total, and funding sources)	<p>Total Funding: \$217,197</p> <p>Funding Sources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$195,477.30 (90%) ACSES Small Scale Grants program. • \$21,719.70 (10%) from the University of Notre Dame Australia. 		
Ethics approval (grantor, date, reference ID)	<p>Grantor: The University of Notre Dame Australia's HREC</p> <p>Date: Conditional approval granted 06/09/24. Full approval granted 18/09/24.</p> <p>Reference ID: 2024-126</p>		



2. Background

2.1. Background

Higher education degrees that involve unpaid practicum, field, or workplace placements put students at acute risk of “placement poverty” (Johnstone et al., 2016; Gair and Baglow, 2018; Baglow and Gair, 2019; Hodge et al., 2021; Oke et al., 2023; Morley et al., 2023). Unpaid placements impact students’ ability to work, and bring about additional costs, such as transport, clothing, childcare, and certifications. Placement poverty impairs students’ mental health, performance, and general wellbeing. While many students experience placement poverty, the effects are particularly felt by students from equity groups¹, who already experience multiple barriers to participation in higher education (Bexley et al., 2013; Davidson et al., 2018). Students from equity groups typically face bigger challenges and experience acute hardship during unpaid placements (Naylor & James, 2016). Several recent studies from Australia and beyond have trialled financial and non-financial support interventions in aid of higher education students, with notable success (Smith, Trinidad & Larkin, 2015; Zacharias & Ryan, 2021). These studies highlight a need for more research exploring and evaluating the impact of such support interventions before widespread implementation. And while support interventions can be effective in general, the impact on students from equity groups specifically is much less well known (Trinidad & Zacharias, 2017). This project extends previous work by comparing the effects of financial and non-financial support interventions across both equity and non-equity student groups.

2.2. Intervention

Our trial implements two interventions:

1. A **financial support disbursement** of \$500 (AUD), paid to students’ nominated accounts as a lump sum. The disbursement is timed to have the funds arrive before a student enters placement.

For context, \$500 is similar to other support disbursements offered by the University of Notre Dame Australia (the University), and is comparable to the upcoming \$319.50 per week Commonwealth Prac Payment, to be introduced in July 2025 (though this is means-tested, so some students will not be able to access it). Furthermore, as of 1 July 2024, the national minimum wage is \$24.10 an hour, so \$500 can be said to cover approximately 20 worked hours.

2. The Empowering Placement Module, an **educational module** designed to help students navigate the challenges that come with unpaid practicum placements, including testimonials and advice from past students, skill-building activities, and self-assessment tools (for example, time, travel and financial planning and management tools, meal planning, calendar assistants, required equipment and supplies directories, etc.). Specifically, the module is made of two parts. The first part comprises a collection of web pages that interactively takes students through a series

¹ “Equity groups” and “equity cohorts” here specifically refer to demographic groups that have been identified as underrepresented in the higher education student population. These include students from low socioeconomic (SES) areas; students from either regional and remote areas of Australia; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; students with disability; students from a non-English speaking background; and students who are the first in their immediate family (FiF) to enter higher education (Grant-Smith, Irmer, & Mayes, 2020).



of evidence-based topics related to practicum and presents a variety of scenarios for which they might prepare in advance. The purpose of this section of the module is to highlight the need for preparation and to prompt personal steps towards addressing these scenarios, particularly ones that students may not have previously considered.

The second part of the module is a downloadable workbook. The workbook is a place to hold personal reflections on their placement preparation and complete exercises that help them prepare (for example, work rosters, meal plans, transport maps, budget materials, etc.). Importantly, workbooks are individualised to each student as they work through the activities and they are private (that is, they cannot be seen by other students or researchers). The way the researchers will capture impact of the module is via surveys and interviews with the students, and not via assessing their workbooks, as they will contain personal data.

Both parts of the module are delivered online via the student's online learning management system, and completion (or non-completion) does not affect their university course grade. The module takes approximately 45 minutes to complete, though it is intended to be used as a companion resource throughout practicum placement. Please note that the University's professional placement team (PPT) prepares students for their clinical placement in terms of skills and theory, standards, and requirements. These topics are not the purview of the Empowering Placement Module and we leave those factors to the PPT.

2.3. Objectives

The objective and primary outcome of both interventions is a positive impact on students' placement participation, placement experience, and overall wellbeing during their practicum. Specifically, the impact on students from equity cohorts is the key outcome of interest. Secondary outcomes include increased knowledge of support services, improved skills (such as time-management and financial management), and improved opportunity to realise their academic, life, and employment potential.

Our theory of change is developed from empirical evidence, University staff and student feedback, and student applications for support. From these sources, it is clear that unpaid practicum placements present significant challenges to students, both financial and non-financial. Our evidence base indicates that these challenges are often a) unforeseen by students and b) too large to overcome without sacrificing in other essential areas of life (that is, food, housing, and employment). Further, it describes how financial support is effective, but not a panacea; a student's level of preparedness, their skillset, individual traits, and awareness of supports also impacts their experiences and performance during practicum placements.

We expect that our first intervention, the financial support disbursement, will alleviate the large financial strain imposed by unpaid practicum placements, and thus enable students to complete placements to the best of their ability without having to sacrifice. We predict that alleviating financial strains will improve students' academic performance (that is, increased attendance, success, and retention rates), their experience of placement, and their wellbeing more generally.

We expect that our second intervention, the educational module, will address the lack of preparedness exhibited by many students going into practicum placement. We predict that



by preparing students to navigate the (sometimes unexpected) challenges of placement, students will be more resilient going into placement and better equipped to handle both financial and non-financial challenges throughout. Being better prepared to handle these challenges should also improve students' academic performance, their experience of placement, and their wellbeing more generally.



3. Trial Design

3.1. Outcomes

Outcome type	Outcome	Measurement	Instrument	Effect size
Primary outcomes	Increased attendance	Practicum placement attendance data	University records	(TBC after Semester 1)
	Increased success	Weighted average grade data for practicum placement units (including withdrawals and fails)	University records	(TBC after Semester 1)
	Increased retention	Course retention data across semesters	University records	(TBC after Semester 1)
Secondary outcomes	Improved capability and motivation to participate in university	Questions regarding self-efficacy, preparedness, confidence, capability, and feasibility around completing placement	Surveys; Focus group interviews	
	Increased social networks and sense of belonging	Questions regarding the meeting of workplace expectations, experiences during placement, and managing life outside of placement	Surveys; Focus group interviews	
	Improved soft and hard skills that support academic attainment	Questions regarding academic and communication skills, time and financial management skills	Surveys; Focus group interviews	
	Improved capacity and motivation to continue studies and to make informed decisions about the future	Questions regarding self-efficacy, preparedness, confidence, capability, and feasibility around continuing studies	Surveys; Focus group interviews	
	Improved opportunities to realise academic, life, and employment potential	Questions regarding experiences during placement and intentions after finishing course	Surveys; Focus group interviews	
	Increased awareness and/or engagement of student support services	Support service engagement; Informal feedback	University records; Focus group interviews	



To capture students' experiences during placement and the effects of interventions, participants are tasked with completing surveys (through Qualtrics online forms) and take part in short structured face-to-face or online focus groups (up to 30 minutes). Questions are tailored to assess each intervention. Student performance indicators (participation, retention, grades, or other learning outcomes) are captured by the University and used to assess how interventions affect performance.

3.2. Trial design

We use a parallel trial design with randomisation to assess our interventions and adopt a crossover structure for the delivery of interventions. Our intention behind this design is to ensure that all students receive all possible support offered by these interventions by the end of the trial, but the timing of their delivery will vary. Each time point also includes a counterfactual group. See the table below:

	Time point 1 (Semester A)	Washout period (3-month break)	Time point 2 (Semester B)
Test group 1	Intervention(s): \$500		Intervention(s): Educational Module
Test group 2	Intervention(s): Educational Module		Intervention(s): \$500
Test group 3	Intervention(s): \$500 AND Educational Module		Intervention(s): None (Control)
Test group 4	Intervention(s): None (Control)		Intervention(s): \$500 AND Educational Module

3.3. Detailed trial process

Data extraction

Students can volunteer to participate in the trial via a Qualtrics online form. Collected registrations are extracted to, and processed in, Microsoft Excel.

Randomisation procedure

The participant pool is first stratified and then randomly assigned to a test group. The pool is stratified according to equity cohort membership, as indicated by students during registration. Each participant within each stratum is assigned a random number using Excel's RAND() function, from which a "static" random number is generated. Next, the list of participants within each stratum is ordered by smallest to largest random number (that is, randomly ordered). Each stratum's participants are then sequentially assigned to one of the four test groups, in order, controlling so that test groups must have equal numbers before new participants can be added (that is, if after assigning one stratum's participants, the four groups were uneven in size, the first assignments in the next stratum would go to the



group(s) with the least participants). This process is applied to the largest stratum first, then the next largest, and so on, until all participants have been allocated to a test group.

Measurement procedure

Students complete surveys at registration (one survey), at the beginning of each of their practicum placements (two surveys), and at the end of each of their practicum placements (two surveys), for a total of five completed surveys. Focus groups and interviews are conducted after each placement ends, during the following semester's teaching weeks. Face-to-face focus groups and interviews are notated and summarised by the research team, and online interviews transcribed and summarised via online transcription tools. Interviews are extracted into Excel once recorded and analysed in NVivo.

Quality control and assurance

All elements of the trial were developed with input from the trial's advisory group, made up of a diverse group of current and past students, University staff, and academics. This was to ensure that the trial design and delivery are appropriate and speak to the needs of the cohorts. Involvement of the advisory group is ongoing and will inform the trial from conception to completion.

Compliance

Test group membership and compliance is monitored throughout each semester via the University's administrative systems and data (for example, learning management system engagement; unit enrolment, participation, and completion data).

Balance tests

No balance test will be conducted. The above randomisation procedure, while allowing for some control over students' assignment to test groups, still distributes students' characteristics (known and unknown) stochastically. We make no assumptions about the frequencies of these characteristics in our sample and thus have no expectations of balance (or imbalance) across test groups.

3.4. Participants

We intend to recruit approximately 300 Bachelor of Nursing students from the University's three campuses (Broome and Fremantle in Western Australia; Sydney in New South Wales), who are undertaking their third round of practicum placements for their course. These students have met the University's [English language proficiency requirements](#). Recruitment for the trial is opt-in, though students are required to declare that they intend to complete the two rounds of practicum placement within the trial duration (two semesters) when giving consent.

With an alpha level of 0.05, an estimated effect size of 0.02 (partial eta squared; Nguyen, Kramer and Evans, 2019; equivalent to effect size $f = 0.14$), and four test groups each with $n = 75$, a one-way ANOVA would have a power estimate of 0.06, which falls below the widely held standard of 0.80 (calculated using G*Power 3.1.9.7; Faul, Erdfelder, Lang & Buchner, 2007). However, as this project aims to implement a repeated measures design (and assuming 100% retention rate over two semesters), this increases our power estimate to an acceptable 0.84, assuming no correlation among repeated measures; or 0.99 assuming a high correlation of 0.50 among repeated measures.



G*Power parameters:

Parameter	Value	Value
Effect size f (directly calculated in G*Power using literature-derived partial η^2 value)	0.1428571	0.1428571
α Error probability	0.5	0.5
Total sample size	300	300
Number of groups	4	4
Number of measurements	2	2
Correlation among repeated measures	0.001 (assumes approximately no correlation among repeated measures)	0.50 (default value; assumes high correlation among repeated measures)
Nonsphericity correction ϵ	1	1
Computed achieved power (1- β)	0.8434085	0.9915880

*Note: exact values provided verbatim from G*Power output. Bolded values change across assumptions.*

3.5. Participants withdrawal criteria and procedures

Participation is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the trial at any time and for any reason. If a participant elects to withdraw, they are asked to attend an exit interview to collect their experiences, which is also voluntary.

Additional students may be invited to participate in the second stage (the second semester of the trial) if recruitment numbers for the first stage are insufficient to meet statistical power needs. If recruitment is opened for the second stage, the same recruitment process will be used as in stage 1, but the intervention will only be one semester in duration.



4. Data management and statistical analysis

4.1. Statistical methods

Generalised linear mixed-model regression will be used to investigate the quantified effects of interventions aggregated at the test group level and at the more granular equity cohort (subgroup) level within each test group. Qualitative data provides important context and will be subject to content, sentiment, and narrative analyses using natural language processing techniques.

We use the industry standard alpha level of 0.05, and a literature-derived effect size of partial $\eta^2 = 0.02$ (Nguyen, Kramer and Evans, 2019) as a baseline.

4.2. Sample cleaning

The sample is cleaned using automated detection and transformation processes wherever possible, and these processes flag missing or spurious cases for manual inspection. Case removal uses a weight-of-evidence approach, and incomplete or spurious cases will be inspected for either removal or multiple imputation. Imputation will only be considered for dependent variables in cases that already have complete sets of auxiliary variable data (single variable regression method). Self-reported auxiliary variables will be confirmed where possible using duplicate records already collected (for example, self-reported student addresses checked against addresses held in university records). If self-reported information mismatches these records, we will defer to the existing records or clarify with the participant if necessary.

4.3. Sample inclusion/exclusion

Our power analysis indicates that we need 75 participants for each of our four trial groups (300 total). Our recruitment strategy is opt-in, and only eligible students (students in the third round of practicum stage of their course) can register. Registrations are only open at the beginning of the trial.

Some attrition from the study is expected, though University records suggest that our target pool has uncommonly low attrition rates for their course (<5%). With this in mind, we intend to apply an intention-to-treat design to our analyses, because we can collect some dependant variable data (for example, grades) even if students attrit or do not fill out their post-placement surveys (non-compliers). Attrition will be monitored and reported for each semester.

Participant exclusion or adjustment decisions need consensus from the whole research team and are made on a case-by-case basis.

4.4. Data management

Aggregated data will be automatically anonymised and de-identified as part of the reporting process.

Administrative data requested from the University for the trial, and data collected by the trial, are handled and stored in accordance with both the University's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) policy and the University's Data Management Policy. A data management plan was lodged with the relevant department of the University. The HREC's



policy is available [here](#), and the University's data management policy and procedures are available [here](#).

Once research is complete, collected information will be stored and treated in accordance with the University's Information Management Procedure and National Health and Medical Research Council protocols.

4.5. Additional analyses

We may conduct subgroup analyses on individual equity cohorts where sample sizes are feasible. This depends on the demographics of the participants who opt-in to the trial.

4.6. Quality control and quality assurance

Only one member of the research team will have access to identified data, and they are responsible for its de-identification.

Data quality is continually assessed and reported to the research team throughout the collection process using common quality metrics (for example, number of missing or incomplete cases, spurious or duplicate records, etc.). Extraction, processing, transformation, and case review actions are documented in a timestamped changelog with descriptions for each action. File version histories are stored for all collected data files. As noted above, individual cases flagged for quality issues are reviewed by the whole research team to minimise individual experimenter bias.



5. Publication

5.1. Plans for publication and dissemination of trial results

A final report as well as an anonymised version of the collected dataset will be submitted to the [ACSES Trials Registry](#).

A conference presentation and a peer-reviewed journal publication will be developed to share key findings with the higher education and equity sectors.



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