

## Work experience in a health library: what's in it for you?

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What do Punch and Judy shows, police balls and egg drives have to do with running a hospital? And why are we reading about such things in JoHILA? The answer lies in a fantastic collaboration between the Northern Sydney Local Health District libraries and TAFE NSW Ultimo, which is giving students a work placement experience like no other.

In 2021, I started a Diploma of Library and Information Services through Ultimo TAFE in Sydney. A big attraction in doing the diploma over a certificate was having a work experience component attached to it, as I knew that would give me not only the valuable experience itself, but something to add to my CV when it came time for job-hunting. So the extended Sydney Covid lockdown from June-October 2021 was crushing in more ways than one.

It looked like we would have to wait until the start of 2022 to complete our work component, but then our wonderful work placement teacher at TAFE NSW Ultimo, Sharon McGregor, started investigating other options. As a result, I was lucky enough to take part in an online work experience with Barry Nunn, the library services manager of the NSLHD, based at Royal North Shore Hospital. Barry had found a fantastic project that needed doing, which was going to be too time-consuming and potentially costly for staff members to undertake, but was perfect for TAFE students.

During a reorganisation at the Ryde Hospital library in 2021, Barry realised it was time to do something about two big leather-bound scrapbooks containing clippings of the history of the hospital from the 1920s. The scrapbooks were in a terrible condition - falling apart, unable to be viewed and disintegrating rapidly. Barry thought that TAFE students would be able to digitise the clippings, and come up with an archive that could eventually be offered to the Ryde Library system for its local history collection, as well as be of interest to anyone using the Ryde Hospital library.

Sharon introduced Barry and me via a Teams meeting to discuss the project and what I heard piqued my interest. As a former journalist, I was intrigued by the fantastic wealth of information from newspapers that no longer existed, and as a Ryde local I was fascinated about this institution that was integral to the lives of so many of us in the area. The Ryde District Soldiers and Memorial Hospital opened during the Depression, on May 12, 1934, with capacity for 56 beds, but was first proposed 16 years before that, as a memorial to the soldiers who had fought in WWI. The clippings in the books ran from the early days of the hospital proposal, through to the building of the hospital and the early days, and on to the 1990s.

Barry and I met outside the Ryde Hospital cafe in September 2021 for a masked handover of the precious scrapbooks. Barry advised me just to look through the clippings and think about how to proceed, then we agreed we would have weekly Teams meetings to work through any issues that arose.

My TAFE student predecessor on the project, Courtney Smith, had already set up the core records for the first 450-odd clippings, dating from 1922 to 1938, on the eHive collection cataloguing system. My job was to start photographing the clippings, tagging them and uploading the records so they could be viewed, adding links to the original articles on Trove if they existed. I was studying a subject on digital repositories at the same time as doing this project, and was initially overwhelmed by the responsibility of it. We were learning the gold standard in what to do as far as photographing and tagging were concerned, and the more I read, the less sure I was about where to start and how to proceed.

However, at my first weekly Teams meeting, Barry did away with my fears, saying: 'Look Dee, the scrapbooks are disintegrating. They're useless as they are. They have no function apart from gathering dust and decomposing. If we do nothing, we'll end up with nothing at all. But if the collection's digitised we can do things with it. If someone's writing, or researching, the clippings will be there. Let's just get them up there and if we need to go back and change anything later on, that's what we'll do.'

My mentor's perspective unlocked the mental barriers for me. I realised he was right - time was of the essence and, rather than overthinking it, action was needed. At the first couple of weekly online sessions we'd discuss the mechanics of the project - for instance, should we use MeSH or natural language subject headings when tagging the articles? We opted for the latter, as the articles were in local newspapers and were written for everyday readers, rather than medical experts, and we were thinking about who might be using the archive in the future (anyone!), and how they would be searching.

We discussed whether the resolution of the images of the articles was clear enough (in the main, yes), and how I would go about searching for lost articles that we knew had once existed but were no longer extant.

Very quickly, however, once the nuts and bolts of the project were sorted out, I started looking forward to our weekly catch-ups just to share with Barry all the quirky things I was finding out about the hospital - and the people who used to run it. In its early days, the hospital ran on the smell of an oily rag. It had no X-ray machine and no heating, there were frequent callouts for fridges and furniture for the patients, and local schoolchildren held egg drives, bringing in eggs from home to feed the patients. The community was an amazing support, and the local newspapers responded by publishing patients details every week - including their names,

addresses and ailments!

Fundraisers were very popular, with the proceeds of card nights and police balls helping the hospital afford the expansions it quickly needed. This eventually extended to open-air carnivals that ran for weeks, featuring baby shows, Punch and Judy shows, boxing matches and an ugly man competition!

The most fascinating find came close to the end of my time on the project, when I came across some fantastic clippings pertaining to a diphtheria immunisation campaign Ryde Hospital undertook in the 1930s for local schoolchildren, bussing schoolkids from nine local public schools to the hospital for their round of four injections. The parallels with the Covid immunisation campaign we were living through nearly 90 years later were incredible. The same health concerns, the same efforts, the same arguments and backlash. The more things change, the more they stay the same!

The discussions I had with Barry as we unearthed all this information ranged from health politics to human nature to world affairs – and of course the importance of libraries as repositories of information! I learned so much from him in these weekly sessions – about people as much as anything else, and about approaching work and life with humour, compassion and curiosity.

My time on the project wrapped up in November 2021, but since then it has gone from strength to strength with other TAFE students. I was replaced by Tony Walker, then Juny Lucin took over from him, putting up photographs of the scrapbooks themselves onto the eHive and arranging the tags in a readily accessible 'cloud' for researchers. Others have taken over from them, all bringing their own skills and ideas to this wonderful project, and ensuring this interesting part of our history has come to light as plans are proceeding for a new Ryde Hospital, being developed on the existing site.

### **How work placement helps students, mentors and TAFE**

After the project, I finished my diploma and started work first at the library of the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts, then in the library at St Joseph's College, Hunters Hill, in Sydney. My mentor Barry was not only my referee for these roles, but has been an invaluable sounding board over the past year. The big lessons I learned from my work experience was not to be afraid to step outside my comfort zone. I was very wary of tackling a digitisation project, and was concerned about doing the wrong thing. But as Barry told me: anything is better than the nothing we have now. Don't overthink it, and we can work it out as we go along.

I became so invested in this project, learned new skills, and gained a wonderful mentor and friend in Barry. He is a calm, kind, humorous and very knowledgeable mentor - having worked for years in the NSW State Library before moving to health,

he had a lot of bigger-picture perspective to accompany the minutiae of what needed doing. He was also very open to ideas, and wonderful in letting students take the running of the project. I can turn to him for advice about anything library related and we have stayed in touch since I finished the project 12 months ago. I know he has the same relationship with past mentees, and that has made a big difference to all of us.

I've also been in touch with a couple of my successors on the project and it's wonderful to see how we've all added something to the eHive collection, and feel a sense of pride in creating something that will last. Students, take every opportunity you are offered, and make the most out of it - use it to gain knowledge, skills and contacts, and to find out what areas of library work you are interested in. Even if you don't find or choose a job in the same area of libraries that you undertake your work experience in, you will have gained valuable new skills and, most importantly, confidence in making suggestions and learning how to work with others. In my case, although I didn't initially feel I was across all the technicalities of digitisation, I love what such projects can do - open up access, help us connect to the community, and so on. I am fascinated by them, and feel I now know a lot more about what is involved, and what is possible. In libraries, as in life, everything is connected and the more you know, the more you can contribute.

For employers weighing up whether to host students for work placement, I say: please do! Think laterally about the sort of projects you can get students working on. Is there something you've been wanting to do for ages but can't afford to spend staff time on? TAFE students may be the answer. Set aside any ideas you may have about who the students might be, and any worries about their lack of experience. Although TAFE students are new to libraries, many of them have spent years in the workforce already in other roles, and bring their skills in problem-solving and new ways to look at an issue, which may cast new light on a project. The exchange of ideas a placement student brings can breathe new life into a workplace. You will also have the wonderful feeling of being able to pass on your years of knowledge and experience to someone who is just starting in the field, and helping to shape their future contribution to libraries.

As for Library and Information Services teachers, having industry ties makes your courses more valuable to students and to employers, and keeps the faculty up-to-date with what's going on in the library world. TAFE NSW Ultimo has excellent industry ties, and it's brilliant for the teachers to be able to say to prospective students: if you come and study with us, you'll undertake valuable work experience and, even if you don't wind up with a job from that, you'll get the skills and knowledge and contacts that will help you into your new career.

Search the Ryde Hospital archive at <https://ehive.com/collections/201378/ryde-hospital-newspaper-archives>



### [Ryde Hospital Newspaper Archives | eHive](https://ehive.com/collections/201378/ryde-hospital-newspaper-archives)

Ryde Hospital located in northwest Sydney, Australia originally known as the Ryde District Soldiers' Memorial Hospital, opened its doors to the public on 12 May 1934 with facilities for 56 inpatients. With planning under way for a new Ryde Hospital, two cracked old leatherbound scrapbooks of newspaper clippings related to the hospital from the 1920s to 1990s are being digitised in a joint ...  
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