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# From WIL<sup>1</sup> to Work Ready: Evaluating the student-learning continuum, a qualitative study

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## **Abstract:**

This paper presents the preliminary findings of an ongoing qualitative study investigating the experiences of students, practitioners, and educators in the placement of students within professional practice and outlines the subsequent implications for professional education. This includes an evaluation of a pedagogical model for work integrated learning (WIL) within the built environment and design disciplines, and its relationship to the student-learning continuum.

This research aims to address a gap in current knowledge, which commonly views a student's 'transition into' university and 'transition out' into professional practice as independent, static events. This paper argues that, rather than simply moving 'into' university and 'out' into professional practice, the student instead experiences a threshold transgression continuum. This is where the student and their learning evolves and transforms through the crossing-over between workplace and academia that occurs several times throughout their study.

In attempting to better understand what it is for the student to transgress and transform, the role that WIL plays in the transition of student from learner to professional is questioned. Using an inductive approach based on grounded theory, this paper evaluates data extrapolated from a series of qualitative open-ended participant interviews with students, practitioners and academics and is collated and analysed using thematic analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> Work integrated learning

## **Background**

The workplace as the context of practice provides for authentic learning not able to be fully simulated in the university campus environment. Equally, the academic environment presents opportunities for learning not available in the workplace. It is well documented that the workplace enables students to experience multiple roles and perspectives, to work collaboratively and reflectively, to apply theory in 'real' situations, and to begin to learn the discourse of the profession (Franz, 2008). According to Duignan (2002), the workplace encourages a behavioural form of learning while a cognitive form is emphasized in the university environment. For Orrell (2007) the knowledge developed at university (academic knowledge) is "predictable, intentional, replicable, prolonged and student-focussed", while knowledge constructed in the workplace (professional knowledge) is "unpredictable, immediate, unique and transparent". It is logical then to attempt to make both a part of student's preparation for professional practice, a position held by a growing number of tertiary institutions as evidenced in their work placement programs generally described as work integrated learning (WIL). For many institutions, this involves providing a block of time in a student's course usually towards the end where they can gain some work experience. In these situations, the student makes the transition between work and university once.

While there are still benefits to be gained from a once in a course experience of work, this paper argues for a continuum of transition across the period of the student's course. From a philosophical position the act of crossing any threshold is immensely powerful. As Kingwell (2003, p. 1) states: "The crossing is no simple matter, though we may blithely perform it dozens or even hundreds of times a day [as in the case of a physical threshold such as a doorway]. What is involved here? What relationships of time and space, of consciousness and identity, of necessity and freedom, are created by the move from outside to in, and back again?". What potential is there for transformation through these physical, conceptual, emotional and existential transgressions and their integration? How do the two environments support each other or compete with each other?

Unlike current research, which tends to emphasise the conceptual dimension, this study seeks to recognize and understand all dimensions as part of a continuum or journey related to a cooperative, action pedagogy for work integrated learning. Its underlying premise is that the WIL student’s continuing, simultaneous interconnection of work and academia; of doing and reflecting in environments that are changing rapidly over short periods of time enables iterative relationships to develop for research, teaching and application, therein advancing the scholarship of integration as conceptualized by Boyer (1990) (Franz, 2008).

### Context

Applying this notion of a continuum of transgression and transformation to the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) built environment and engineering (BEE) faculty undergraduate course program varies slightly depending on which of the three undergraduate programs the student undertakes. In this paper we will focus on our Bachelor of Design (DE40), Architectural Studies major as per Table 1 (Franz, Plakalovic & Davis, 2008).

Table 1: Example of QUT BEE DE40 WIL transgression continuum in practice

Year	1				2				3				4							
Semester	1		2		Work Placement		1		2		Work Placement		1		2					
Design (DE40) Architectural Studies																				

**Legend:**

- Commence preparation for WIL in the 2nd semester of 1st year; 'How to do WIL' – Community Blackboard site (on-line resource)  
Careers and Employment – Work Placement Preparation Online Modules  
Contact WIL Team for Assistance
- Recommended times to complete work placements. **Please note:** Work placements can also be conducted during semester breaks and on a part-time basis during semester (depending on work place organisation requirements and study commitments).
- Enrol in WIL units if selected WIL as a 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> minor (each minor consists of 4 units).
- Each rectangle represents one unit of study

Table 1 highlights the number of times students experience this threshold transgression from academia into the work place. Key elements of the above structure are providing suitable ‘Work Placement Preparation’ resources through online co-curricular activities (developed by the Careers and Employment division); incorporating reflective practice through each of the WIL units; allowing students to experience one or more work place organisation/s; and to capitalise on the integrative potential between academia and practice.

Through ongoing evaluation this research aims to identify if this structure adequately develops student employability capabilities, confidence, and professional identity.

## **Methodology**

In order to better understand this threshold continuum and how it is reflected in the current QUT WIL curriculum, each stakeholder (professionals, academics and students) were encouraged to participate in an interview. Six (preliminary) exploratory interviews were conducted in Brisbane with each of the three groups: professionals (n=2), academics (n=2) and students (n=2). As an acknowledgement for participation, student participants received a \$30 gift voucher. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach.

The 'Professional' group comprised of senior managers, 1 female and 1 male, representing architecture and human resources. All were recruited through target emails to local businesses in these disciplines. The 'Academic' group comprised of teaching staff, 2 males, from industrial design and architecture. All were recruited through targeted emails requesting participation. The 'Student' group comprised of 1 female and 1 male, representing interior design and construction management. All were recruited through a general faculty-wide email to students enrolled in WIL units requesting participation.

## **Analysis**

A semi-structured approach was utilised, this was based on better understanding the perspective of each cohort (university, industry and students) regarding WIL. One of the main aspects of this study is to understand how well the current program meets the needs of each stakeholder and what can be done to better prepare students for the continuous transition 'out into' work and 'back into' university. A Thematic Analysis was undertaken on the interview data (transcripts) to identify key themes. A key aspect of this was to identify the extent of convergence or divergence in what stakeholder's perceived to be the most appropriate approaches to WIL, advantages and disadvantages to graduate preparedness as well as perceptions of stakeholder responsibilities.

## **Findings and discussion**

It was found that each cohort generally appreciates the objectives of the current WIL structure. All found the services offered through the university through WIL to be of great benefit, with the role of university viewed as mediator, correlating all the ‘bits’ between learning and working.

Students and professionals held similar views regarding the need to begin integration early in the learning cycle with each stating – the first year of study to be ideal point of introduction. Academics however, viewed undertaking WIL later in the course to be of greater benefit to the student and industry. This contrast is evident through the general view from academics that the ‘softer’ skills required to act and think professionally were latent in the educational setting, whereas the professionals and students generally indicated an individual either ‘has’ or ‘does not have’ these skills (as an intrinsic personality trait). Students expressed this through personal anecdotes of seeking employment outlining differences in their personal work ethic to that of other students. Presenting an ultimate view that they will be ‘better off’ than fellow students, simply because they have chosen to extend themselves and find work (professionally) beyond the minimal capacity expected (e.g. beyond their individual study requirements).

### References to threshold transgression through defining personal understandings of WIL

Interestingly participants referenced the notion of continuous transgression as a key factor of the WIL curriculum and improving employability. From the professional perspective WIL is seen as an *“initiative [sic] around better preparing students to be able to take the theoretical base or body of knowledge that they are given during their studies [sic] and balance that with now we’re going to apply that in the real world”*. (Professional, F1). As well as *“a really good way of [sic] sling shotting students capabilities to get them ready for the workplace which I think is something that the university courses have been traditionally a little bit weak on”* (Professional, M2).

The academic perspective too referenced the benefits of continuous amalgamation of learning at university with the integration of learning at work to be *“like killing two birds with one stone but in a really professional environment a really structured environment and a great learning experience for the student”* (Academic, M1). A second participant expanding this notion further to state *“its ideal when you have the two are parallel when you have the theory coming out and you have the opportunity to apply the theory and if you have the opportunity to apply it on a real job then the learning process is far greater it is a more deep, deeper learning”* (Academic, M2).

Students, however, emphasised the importance of ‘learning about work’, ‘what working means’ and the importance of this in defining future working directions as explained by one student *“my first experience taught me that there are so many niche markets and I am learning that there is more than what I thought originally”* (Student, F2). Expanding further to state *“what you learn at work you apply to your assignment so when I look at an assignment a lot different to someone that works in a bar not that there is anything wrong with that but it changes your perception of the whole industry”* (Student, F2).

#### Expected improvement in student core and ‘soft’ skills throughout course of work placement

Students and professionals actively participating in WIL see work placements throughout the duration of a course as an opportunity to learn fundamental workplace skills; with the ultimate belief that this would place them in a ‘better’ position upon graduation. Students outlined the opportunity to receive better pay/positions is a primary reason for undertaking WIL units. As explained by one student when questioned on their reasons for undertaking WIL *“why start at fourth year when you can start in first year and hopefully put yourself in a position where you are higher paid and in better position than others that are graduating”* (Student, F2). Students describe working whilst studying as an enabler, a transition process that enables them to explore the concept of working more deeply. *“I guess when your in the industry your only learning that side of it your*

*only learning the companies process that are specifically required for the job whereas at uni your not just learning that – your learning all [sic] the other sides of the industry,” (Student, M1).*

Professionals echoed this sentiment stating it would be a ‘quicker’ transition to better position in the firm for graduates if they get the chance to work through more simplistic duties whilst studying and work their way to more complex tasks overtime as described by one professional “*a bit of basic drafting, probably a bit of basic office clean up duties, simple photocopying and running errands that’s starting in first year, by the time they get to fifth year their final year (of study) we would expect them to be team members on final jobs, as part of documentation teams” (Professional, M2).*

## **Conclusions**

This paper provided an insight into the perspectives professionals, academics and students regarding current WIL curriculum in the Faculty of Built Environment and Engineering at the Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia.

This study will continue to collect data from each stakeholder on an ongoing basis until a minimum number of participants per cohort have been interviewed with the intention of interviewing a total of 30 participants. Furthermore, this study acknowledges the current cohort association with WIL either through study – as a student; education as – an academic; or as a workplace – mentor/manager. To reduce bias, future interviews will also include representatives from each cohort that are *not* currently involved with WIL. The findings of this study and future research will serve as a guiding framework for continuous curriculum development.



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