

CHAPTER 1

WORK INTEGRATED LEARNING

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In the coming decades, environmental, cultural, economic and social changes will have a profound global impact (Hajkowicz, Cook & Littleboy, 2012). The higher education sector is under pressure to transform the way it operates in response to these forces (Ernst & Young, 2012). The emerging knowledge economy, progressing technological capabilities, increasing global mobility, and growing demands for economic productivity, require a proficient, innovative and competitive work force. Education is perceived as a key mechanism for preparing the population to meet the global demands of the 21st century. Work integrated learning (WIL) is internationally recognized and nationally endorsed as a strategy for ensuring students are exposed to authentic learning experiences with the opportunity to apply theoretical concepts to practice-based tasks, ultimately enhancing graduate employability (Knight & Yorke, 2004; Peach & Matthews, 2011).

Developing an Understanding of Work integrated Learning (WIL)

WIL is the term most often used within the Australasian context, and increasingly globally, to identify the myriad experiences that engage students in the workplace. WIL has been defined in a number of ways. Cooper, Orrell and Bowden (2010) explain WIL as being those parts of a course of study which involve an experience undertaken within a practice setting. Patrick, Peach and Pocknee (2008, p. iv) define WIL as an “umbrella term for a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum”. While these definitions differ in the location of learning, both encompass a range of activities that integrate learning and practice.

Rowe, Kelliher, and Winchester-Seeto (2011) term experiential learning as participation activities under the umbrella of experience-based learning. They propose that participation activities can be broadly considered against two variables, namely, the distance between learning and the campus-based classroom (i.e. on-campus vs off-campus), and the degree of engagement in the practice (i.e. high engagement, such as teaching practicum, vs low engagement, such

as observation). Experience-based learning finds its roots in the philosophy of Dewey (1938) who argued for the worth of well-structured experience as being a valuable and rich source of learning. WIL embraces the concept of experience-based learning and encompasses an intersection with the world of work which is experienced in a myriad of ways.

WIL offers an approach to learning in universities and higher education that sees the boundaries of the university as permeable. Practices such as visiting industry experts, simulation activities that engage students in running pretend businesses, working with virtual patients in health, and engaged practicums in teaching, become ever more present within the pedagogies of the university. These pedagogies are not tokenistic engagement with the workplace, but are deliberate approaches that aim to blend the study undertaken by students within the classroom with the experience of practices in the workplace. Activities that constitute WIL extend across a continuum from low to high levels of authenticity and engagement in the workplace. WIL is highly dependent upon the context, discipline and intent of the pedagogical approach.

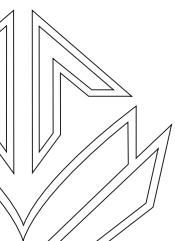
WIL experiences are

- authentically engaged with practices and experiences of the workplace
- located within an intentional discipline-centred curriculum, and
- a focus towards graduate learning outcomes and career pathways.

WIL is an educational process, service and experience with foundational pedagogy and theory (Moreland, 2005). It is a diverse concept designed to blend theoretical concepts with practice based learning, thereby enhancing the capacity of graduates to be innovative, productive and collaborative employees. Whilst this has the potential to compromise a shared understanding, flexibility strengthens the possibilities and opportunities it presents.

Evidencing Employability Capabilities

WIL is promoted as an educational approach that addresses the requirement for educational institutions to provide evidence of employability capabilities that students acquire throughout their studies (Ferns & Moore, 2012). These authors attest that while the development and delivery of programs with a WIL framework are resource intensive and present numerous challenges, successful student outcomes are reliant on the relevance and authenticity of the learning experience. WIL requires carefully designed assessment profiles, enabling developmental progression, with an emphasis on constructive and timely feedback. The need to ensure rigour and relevance in students' learning experiences and assessments



is paramount as universities operate in a more competitive and transparent environment (Ferns & Pegden, 2012). WIL is a strategy for identifying and assuring standards of employment-related generic outcomes (Oliver, 2011).

Benefits of WIL

Students come to tertiary education to pursue an interest in a subject but aside from some vague notions hold unclear views about future careers. Work placements allow students an opportunity to work alongside an established practitioner in their field of study and to engage with an authentic workplace of practice. The benefits discussed here can be true for all broad forms of WIL delivery; however, the following discussion primarily focuses on work placements. The benefits of WIL have been extensively researched and arguably the main focus of research on stakeholders' benefits. A comprehensive literature review of student benefits broadly separates these into career, academic and personal benefits (Dressler and Keeling, 2011).

Career benefits

Literature has long pointed out that work placement programmes provide graduates with a direct entry into the labour market (Braunstein, 2001; Valadkhani, Worthington, & Houlbrook, 2001). Given that WIL students have obtained relevant work experience before graduating, it is not surprising that their uptake into the workplace is more rapid compared to graduates who have not had relevant work experience (Calway & Murphy, 2000). The rapid uptake of WIL graduates is frequently attributed to the connections students have developed during work placements (Ferkins, 2002). However, a significant advantage these students have over non-WIL students is that they have evidence of their ability to apply their knowledge and technical skills in an authentic setting whilst successfully working within a workplace team. Students who have had work placements tend to make better informed decisions about their career direction and feel more certain of their career choices (Zegwaard & Coll, 2011). Graduates from WIL degrees have also reported higher starting salaries.

Academic benefits

Work placement experiences benefit students by equipping them with skills useful for academic (on-campus) learning. Fleming and Eames (2005) reported that WIL increases students' research abilities, critical thinking and time management skills. Many WIL practitioners argue that after completing relevant work placements, students return with increased enthusiasm for their studies. The process of contextualising on-campus learning into a relevant workplace helps students understand and appreciate why certain topics within their studies are necessary. Studies indicate that students who have completed work placements have improved

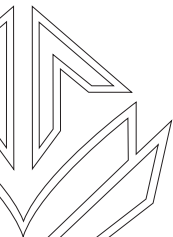
ability to put taught theories into practice (Allen & Peach, 2007), tend to be more analytical in problem solving (Freudenberg, Brimble, & Cameron, 2011), and have improved disciplined thinking (Fleming & Eames, 2005). To draw direct links between WIL and increased academic performance is complicated due to the difficulty of separating other confounding variables and the inherent element of programme bias (employer/programme convenors selecting higher performing students over lower performing students). Nevertheless, some authors have reported that students who have undertaken WIL obtained higher grade point averages (Blair, Millea & Hammer, 2004; Tanaka & Carlson, 2012), performed better in their final year of undergraduate studies (Gomez, Lush, & Clements, 2004), and tended to gain higher levels of end-of-degree honours (Mandilaras, 2003).

Personal benefits

Researchers have identified that during work placements interpersonal communication skills are developed (Eames & Cates; 2011) students adaptability to change are improved (Freudenberg), and ability to make decisions are enhanced (Crebert, Bates, Vell, & Patrick, 2004). There is evidence that work placements enhance students' ability to work within teams, achieve common goals, and develop organisational skills. Some research has indicated that successfully undertaking a comprehensive project-based work placement increases students' confidence in their ability to undertake further research work (Zegwaard & McCurdy, 2014), improves confidence applying for job positions (Reddan, 2008), and increases self-efficacy (DeLorenzo, 2000). There is a strong argument to be held that work placements provide students an opportunity to develop much-needed professional identity (Trede, 2012) and to familiarise themselves with professional ethics and workplace values (Campbell & Zegwaard, 2011).

Employer benefits

Employers often indicate they take on work placement students as a form of altruistic contribution to their sector (Braunstein, 2001; Reeve, 2001). Employers do gain significant additional benefits from being part of the WIL process. An advantage of taking WIL students is the completion of short-term technical tasks at low cost (Hayes, 1978). Having WIL students placed within the organisation is well-recognised by employers as a way to recruit new graduates prior to graduation. Employers also report that having WIL students in the workplace is a way of introducing fresh and different ideas (Tanaka, 2009). Many employers want to build relationships with universities in part to add to their corporate image, but also to access university expertise and specialised resources. There is a link between completing work placements and pursuing graduate studies, where students who have undertaken university supported work-based research focused placements identified higher-level careers that required postgraduate qualifications,



thus enrolled in further studies upon completion of the undergraduate degrees (Zegwaard & McCurdy, 2014). An additional benefit of this link is that some of these students undertake the research component of the postgraduate degree with previous work placement employers.

Benefits for educational institutions

A work placement opportunity grants students a learning opportunity that is unique. The opportunity of full immersion in a relevant workplace of practice, engaging in authentic work, enacting the workplace norms and professional behaviours, and to do so for an extended duration, is a learning experience that is difficult to simulate on-campus. Some benefits to educational institutions share commonality with those of industry, where educational institutions strive to be seen as connected to relevant industries and also seek collaborative research opportunities with industry partners. Student work placements are a powerful way of connecting institutions with employers and building collaborative research relationships.

Industry Engagement

Partnerships with industry, and community engagement, are key to executing an authentic and inclusive learning experience and maintaining currency of course content (Ferns, 2012; Hodges, 2011). Establishing and maintaining mutually beneficial partnerships builds capacity for both the educational institution and industry. van Rooijen (2011) believes the university and corporate partnership requires a reconceptualisation and attests that universities should be “a hybrid with society” (p.6). The full benefits of WIL are only realised when the experiences are connected to a real world context through dynamic and flexible partnerships with external organisations. Such an approach facilitates academic integrity, industry credibility, and assurance of graduates with skills transferable across different contexts.

Types of WIL

Rowe, Mackaway, & Winchester-Seeto (2012) conceptualise the various types of WIL within the framing of locality (i.e. on-campus/off-campus) and levels of engagement in the workplace or community (Figure 1.1). The model highlights the complexity of providing a single definition for WIL, but also shifts thinking away from a linear continuum of superiority towards appreciating the purposefulness of particular activities.

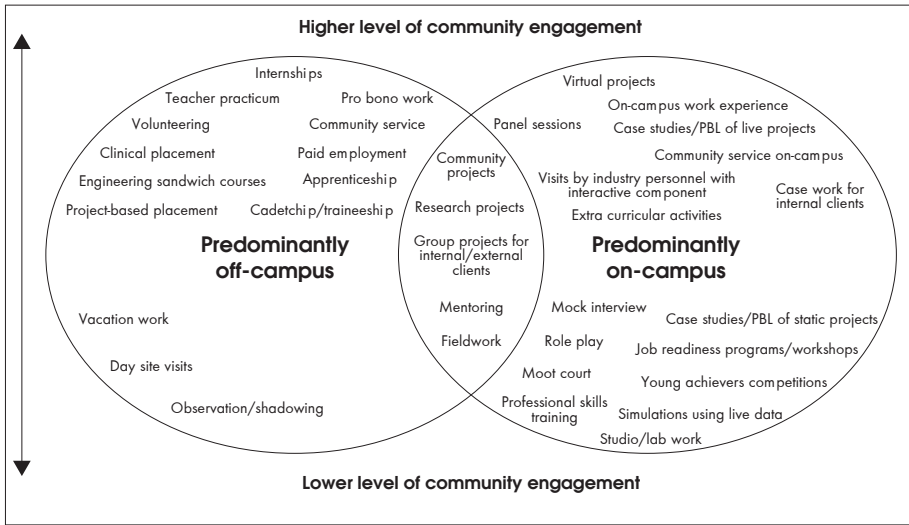


Figure 1.1 A typology of activity: Exploration of contemporary WIL research and themes (Rowe, Mackaway, & Winchester-Seeto, 2012)

Key Points

- WIL is an umbrella term for a range of pedagogical activities that are designed to enhance the integration of theory and practice.
- WIL extends across a continuum from low to high levels of authenticity and engagement.
- WIL describes experiences that are (1) authentically engaged with the practices and experiences of the workplace, (2) located within an intentional discipline-centred curriculum, and (3) a focus towards graduate learning outcomes and career pathways.
- WIL is a valuable mechanism for demonstrating authentic learning and providing evidence of student outcomes.
- The full benefits of WIL are only realised when the experiences are connected to a real world context through dynamic and flexible partnerships with external organisations.
- The benefits of workplace based WIL for students include career clarification, industry connections and rapid employment upon graduation, critical thinking, research abilities, time management, disciplined thinking, appreciation of the need for study topics, ability to engage with workplace norms and professional behaviour, and may improve overall academic performance.
- The benefits to employers include the opportunity to recruit new graduates, complete a technical task at low cost, bring in new and fresh ideas, have access to university expertise and specialised resources, and improve corporate image.