Compulsory work-integrated learning

A solution for equity degree propositioning and future proofing

Bracken , Elizabeth ; Patton, Narelle ; Lindsay, Euan

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Compulsory work-integrated learning: A solution for equity degree propositioning and future proofing

LIZ BRACKEN[1]
Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, Australia
NARELLE PATTON
Charles Sturt University, Albury, Australia
EUAN LINDSAY
Aalborg University, Aalborg, Denmark

Work-integrated learning (WIL) placement is increasingly being prioritized in university course curricula as industry, students and government seek improved employability skills, work-ready graduates and stronger graduate employability outcomes. For disciplines such as business, without industry accreditation mandating WIL placement experiences WIL placement are typically non-compulsory and administered through competitive or self-selection approaches which favor higher grade point average (GPA) and socioeconomic status (SES) students at the expense of less advantaged students. Despite well-documented benefits to multiple stakeholders, business schools' reluctance to embrace compulsory WIL placement is underpinned by internal challenges of cost, supply, and implementation. The dynamics of business schools' future sustainability is under threat by market disruptions, pandemic induced income and enrolment losses, and performance driven funding. Potentially the introduction of compulsory WIL placement could decrease existing discriminatory WIL placement practices and enhance student equity while delivering a powerful value proposition to combat future sustainability challenges.

Keywords: WIL placement, graduate employability, graduate employment, business schools, placement inequity, national priority industry linkage fund (NPILF)

ENGAGEMENT WITH WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING

Globally universities are prioritizing deeper engagement with work-integrated learning (WIL) for many stakeholder reasons (Govender & Taylor, 2015; Kay et al., 2019; Moore et al., 2015). Amongst the most powerful forces driving stronger WIL engagement are the well-documented employability skills and graduate employability benefits which make a strong contribution towards developing the work ready graduates industry is demanding (Effeney, 2020; Silva et al., 2018). The Australian government has responded to these demands through higher education (HE) performance-based funding strategies demonstrating financial commitment to an employability agenda via the Higher Education Reform Package, the Job-ready Graduates Package and the 2021 National Priorities and Industry Linkage Fund (NPILF). Together these initiatives contributed AUD$18 billion to HE in 2020, growing to AUD$20 billion by 2024 with AUD$900 million allocated exclusively to the NPILF (Australian Government Department of Educartion Skills and Employment 2020). Yet despite this increasing pressure around employability skill development, university engagement with WIL is not equally spread across disciplines.

WIL is "an umbrella term for a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum." (Patrick et al., 2008, p. 9). This range of underpinning pedagogical approaches has led to multiple terms that are often used interchangeably with and have come to mean WIL in some instances. Practice-based learning, professional practice, problem-based-learning, experiential learning, workplace learning, and practice-based education are

[1] Corresponding author: Liz Bracken, ebracken@csu.edu.au

some frequently cited WIL pedagogical approaches, demonstrating the diversity of WIL. Confusion often caused by this diverse range of pedagogical approaches is further compounded by the large volume of WIL strategies evident in the WIL space. In an Australian first, Universities Australia (UA) conducted a detailed audit of WIL across Australian Universities identifying five categories of WIL (i.e., placements, projects, fieldwork, simulations and other) to develop a national WIL profile (Universities Australia, 2019). These categories covered a continuum of WIL activities from classroom-based activities such as case studies to fully immersed in-situ work placement. Adding to this complexity, are many new and emerging innovative WIL approaches such as micro-placements, hackathons, and incubators which are also on the rise (Kay et al., 2019).

This paper focuses on the placement category of WIL (WIL placement) which Moore et al. (2015, p. 242) define as "placement within curriculum where students apply theory to practice in authentic professional workplace setting under the supervision of professionals". WIL placement pedagogy is strongly underpinned by learning theories such as Dewey's (1938) socially constructed learning, Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory and Lave & Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory where a learning curriculum unfolds in practice and learning is constructed through a process of increasing contribution, activity and becoming a full participant in a workplace community.

Across universities, business schools in particular display exceptionally weak appetites for offering WIL placement experiences (Universities Australia, 2019). Business schools have largely rejected industry calls for compulsory WIL placement for all students, instead typically opting to implement WIL placement in a controlled and narrow way where placement is only accessible for students who excel academically or can afford it (Brooks & Youngson, 2016; Klein & Weiss, 2011; Tomlinson, 2012). This curricular approach is misaligned with a growing industry trend towards employing mid-range GPA students in recognition that these students have a range of desirable employability skills, and the increased diversity frequently provides a better cultural fit than academically excellent students (Australian Association of Graduate Employers, 2017).

The lack of business school engagement with WIL placement is a global phenomenon with a compelling link to the absence of industry accreditation. Business schools remain an international outlier against other disciplines such as medicine, law, education and health who have authoritative industry accreditation regulating compulsory WIL placement (Aprile & Knight, 2020; Darley & Luethge, 2019; Hogan, Kortt, & Charles, 2021; McIntyre & Gilbert, 2021; Sánchez-Bayón et al., 2020; Sziegat, 2021). In the Australian context, this reluctance is being increasingly challenged by significant government performance-based funding initiatives reinforcing industry calls to prioritize employability skills development for work-ready graduates. This is particularly pertinent for Australian business schools who among them produce one-third of Australian university graduates (Australian Business Deans Council, 2016).

WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING PLACEMENT BENEFITS

WIL placement benefits a range of stakeholders (Artess et al., 2017; Brooks & Youngson, 2016; Peach et al., 2016; Wilton, 2012) although arguably, students have the most to gain from compulsory WIL placement through the strong and positive impacts found in student learning, progression, and graduation rates along with improved career clarification and a more developed sense of professional identity (Brooks & Youngson, 2016; Dunn et al., 2016; Sendall et al., 2016; Trede & McEwen, 2015). The opportunity to increase employability skills and social capital through WIL placement experiences are strong drivers for students to engage with placement programs (Batistic & Tymon, 2017; Silva et al.,

2018). Albeit a useful marketing proposition for management, more salient to students are the better graduate employability outcomes WIL placement delivers including securing better paid, higher level graduate employment faster than their non-placement peers (Allen et al., 2013; Brooks & Youngson, 2016; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021).

For universities, WIL placement delivers business schools significant increases in undergraduate enrolment, retention, and graduation (particularly for disadvantaged cohorts) while facilitating external research collaborations with industry (Baker et al., 2017; Doherty & Stephens, 2020; McEwen & Trede, 2014; Sendall et al., 2016). Industry motivations for supporting WIL placement opportunities can include a genuine desire to give back to society and strengthen community links. However, WIL placement programs are essentially an assortment of self-serving propositions including creating recruitment 'try before you buy' pipelines, low cost access to fresh ideas and innovation, improved marketing and positioning, and a platform to demonstrate corporate social responsibility and good citizenship enhancing companies' brands and reputation (DeClou et al., 2013; Dunn et al., 2016; Patrick et al., 2008; Pymm & Juznic, 2014).

Australian business schools seemingly impervious to the plethora of stakeholder benefits, rank poorly in terms of WIL placement uptake, as seen in the comprehensive 2019 Universities Australia (UA) national profile of WIL. The report thoroughly examined WIL types across all disciplines and identified business schools rank last with consistently poor engagement and participation in WIL placement (Universities Australia, 2019).

In a breakdown of student cohorts, the UA investigation found that international, Indigenous, low SES and regional, rural and remote (RRR) students have the lowest WIL placement participation rates, all of whom engage with WIL placement far less than high-GPA and -SES students (Universities Australia, 2019). The UA findings replicate earlier research demonstrating exclusionary placement practices principally impact low SES, first-in-family, disabled, mentally ill, ethnic minorities, less academically able, international, and Indigenous students (Blackmore et al., 2014; McAuliffe et al., 2012; Peach et al., 2016). Additionally, the Australian Collaborative Education Network (ACEN), the peak body for WIL in Australia, recently highlighted to the government the many less advantaged groups who are precluded from WIL experiences (ACEN, 2020).

Still, compulsory WIL placement has not become standard practice in business schools. Many business schools do not have a WIL placement program of any kind, and for those that do, it is remains an ad hoc, 'bolt-on' co-curricular element generally in a limited capacity (Universities Australia, 2019). Historically non-compulsory WIL placement favors high-GPA and -SES students and discriminates against disadvantaged cohorts, reducing vital learning and networking opportunities, impacting employability skill levels and subsequent graduate employment opportunities (Allen et al., 2013; Brooks & Youngson, 2016; El-Temtamy et al., 2016). These exclusionary practices are discriminatory and in direct contrast to the intent of the 2015 National Strategy on Work-Integrated Learning in University Education designed to encourage wider participation and inclusivity across Australia (Mackaway & Winchester-Seeto, 2018; Universities Australia et al., 2015). More recently the 2020 Higher Education Reform discussion paper (Department of Education Skills and Employment (DESE), 2020) was equally explicit in its ambition for the sector to address student disadvantage concerns.

NON-COMPULSORY PLACEMENT SELECTION

Demand and supply issues are the bane of compulsory WIL placement programs. Placement needs routinely outstrip industry capacity and willingness (Jackson et al., 2017; Kay et al., 2019), creating the

dilemma of how to allocate students to limited opportunities. Placement pool scarcity can be marginally offset through student self-sourcing options, but this approach handicaps disadvantaged students (Dunn et al., 2016). Simultaneously, an assortment of other factors co-exist to disincentivize business schools such as the cost and difficulties of delivering compulsory WIL placement and the absence of industry accreditation requiring such efforts (Peach et al., 2016; Winchester-Seeto, 2019).

Supply and Cost Issues of Compulsory WIL Placement

Compulsory WIL placement is difficult to achieve due to dual factors of placement shortages and high placement costs. Universities' ability to generate and deliver enough placements for all students is severely constrained (Frew & Smith, 2019; Jackson, 2018), in part due to industry reluctance to offer placement opportunities for students. Industry reluctance has several underlying causes including not understanding the process well, not knowing how to get involved, inflexible university schedules, insufficient time and/or resources to supervise a student on placement or simply being unwilling to negotiate placement terms (Australian Workforce Productivity Agency, 2014; Jackson et al., 2017; Kay et al., 2019). Additionally, the *Independent Review into RRR Education* (Halsey, 2018) and the Job-ready Graduates package both highlight the struggle RRR students experience with reduced placement availability and accessibility.

For university stakeholders, without exception WIL placement programs are expensive, time consuming and resource intensive (Winchester-Seeto, 2019) with WIL placement estimated to cost universities between 15-21% more than non-WIL placement teaching practices (Australian Department of Education, 2011). Examples of some of the costs (and challenges) associated with offering compulsory WIL placement opportunities include canvassing placements, workplace cultural differences, mentoring, placement supervision, negotiating placement learning, monitoring of placement, legislative compliance and general administration (Doherty & Stephens, 2020; Jackson et al., 2017).

In lieu of adequate WIL placements to cater for all students, business schools often use competitive systems to determine which students are allocated scarce opportunities. High GPA students are traditionally preferred and encouraged for competitive selection. Meanwhile high SES students can bypass competitive selection altogether through self-sourced placement opportunities.

Competitive Work-Integrated Learning Placement Selection Favors High Grade Point Average Students

Academic performance is the most frequently used selection criteria for scarce WIL placement opportunities as GPAs are a convenient, pragmatic, and easy to administer method for filtering students (Dunn et al., 2016; Jackson, 2018; Patrick et al., 2008). The position has been defended using industry's historical preference for high academic achievers predicated on the belief that high GPAs signal student ability and productivity (Cai, 2013). Similarly, universities showcase high GPA students in WIL placements to mitigate reputational risk through better placement performances, preferable traits and motivations, a conclusion often inferred but not empirically demonstrated (Cole et al., 2007; Dunn et al., 2016; Jackson, 2018; Patrick et al., 2008). Difficulties placing medium/low GPA students surreptitiously reinforce the high GPA approach with universities discouraging such applications to further economize on selection processes (Mackaway & Winchester-Seeto, 2018). Without evidence universities also perversely claim academically competitive WIL placement practices are not only fair but may increase student motivation to attain high grades to gain rare placement opportunities (Dunn et al., 2016; Wilton, 2012). However, without actual increases in placement numbers, lower GPA students remain at a disadvantage.

Contrary to this historical university reliance on high GPAs, industry now wants greater access to a more diverse pool of placement students including those with limited academic success resulting from disadvantaged backgrounds and reduced learning opportunities (Dunn et al., 2016; Mackaway & Winchester-Seeto, 2018). It seems not only is academic performance an unreliable indicator of professional success, but GPA selective programs contradict some reasons industry engages in placement. As a result, industry is progressively abandoning high GPAs as a useful screening tool, reflecting contemporary research suggesting students with mid-range GPAs are highly employable and perform just as well in placement (Jackson, 2018).

Self-Sourcing Work-Integrated Learning Placement is Discriminatory

Although superficially more equitable and ostensibly open to all, self-sourcing placements discriminate against disadvantaged students. Low SES students are difficult to place in an increasingly competitive placement market (Klein, 2011; Tomlinson, 2012). Students' ability to independently find appropriate placement (the foundation of a self-sourcing WIL placement program), relies upon having social capital and personal professional networks (often their parents) that are typically characterized by parental education levels and high SES backgrounds (Allen et al., 2013; Sandefur et al., 2006; Smith, 2010; Teachman et al., 1997). Low SES rarely have the necessary levels of social capital to source their own WIL placements and if they do, require more industry mentor support on placement (Kay, 2019). In a Catch-22, low SES/social capital students have their disadvantage reinforced by the denial of a placement experience and with it, valuable employability skill and social capital development capable of closing gaps and improving their graduate employability (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021; Mackaway & Winchester-Seeto, 2018; Peach et al., 2016).

Aside from social capital issues, various costs accompanying placement experiences further frustrate financially disadvantaged students' ability to persevere with self-sourcing placement opportunities. WIL placement can quickly compound existing financial hardship to produce heavy monetary burdens, rendering WIL placement programs near impossible for disadvantaged students without financial and practical assistance. Participating in WIL placement programs reduces students' capacity to maintain pre-existing part time work and as business placements are often unpaid (Allen et al., 2013; Moore et al., 2015), placement has the potential to produce significant financial hardship to lower SES cohorts often already struggling to meet education costs. Less obvious indirect costs associated with placement such as travel, accommodation, childcare and purchasing appropriate business clothing reinforce the economic barriers (Halsey, 2018; Jackson et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2015). For compulsory WIL placement to work, universities, industry and government all need to financially support disadvantaged students to complete compulsory WIL placement, potentially adopting a variety of existing mechanisms including, scholarships, studentships, paid placement and loans.

Non-intentionally, competitive selection and self-sourcing WIL placement practices reinforce discriminatory barriers towards disadvantaged student cohorts, denying rich learning opportunities to students who do not fit a narrowly prescribed range of academic excellence or do not have enough financial privilege and/or social capital to self-source placement. Paradoxically, the disadvantaged students known to benefit the most from WIL placement have the least access.

WIL placement shortages, processes, costs, and student circumstances present obvious barriers to business schools. Less obvious is the role accreditation has disincentivizing compulsory WIL placement.

Industry Accreditation is the Gatekeeper of Compulsory Work-Integrated Learning Placement

Industry bodies such as the Australian Chamber of Commerce (ACC), Australian Computer Society (ACS), Australian Management Institute (AMI), Business Council of Australia (BCA), Chartered Professional Accountants Australia (CPA Australia) and Australian Human Resources Institute (AHRI) have criticized narrow teaching foci in business schools, advocating the importance of employability skills in tertiary curriculum through WIL placement programs (Seethamraju, 2012). Regardless of the known benefits and the long-standing industry calls to action, (Brooks & Youngson, 2016; Dearing, 1997; Sendall et al., 2016), few business schools have holistically embraced compulsory WIL placement as a vehicle to develop students' employability skills and work-readiness. In contrast, disciplines such as law, medicine, engineering, dentistry, and education have powerful industry accreditation requirements, which regulate graduates' market entry into their profession and with this, the ability to mandate and enforce WIL placement inclusion in course curricula.

Beyond the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) accreditation, business schools are not regulated by additional industry accreditation bodies; rather any participation remains entirely voluntary. Optional Australian accreditation does exist for business schools, for example the Australian HR Institute (AHRI) for a Human Resource degree or the Australian Marketing Institute (AMI) for a marketing degree. These accreditations are non-essential 'nice to have', not 'must have' items. Furthermore, although these industry accreditation bodies consider WIL placement within business degrees genuinely desirable, WIL placement programs are not essential to gaining endorsement. Industry is effectively powerless in business schools, it can coax but not compel business schools to embed WIL placement into course curricula, leaving WIL placement as a discretionary and elective choice that most schools decline.

Similarly, international industry business accreditation bodies do not mandate compulsory WIL placement experiences for business students. Known as the Triple Crown of business school accreditation are the USA based Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), the European based European Foundation for Management Development (EQUIS) and the UK based Association of MBAs (AMBA) (Durand & Dameron, 2017; McIntyre & Gilbert, 2021; Sziegat, 2021). Although AACSB, EQUIS and AMBA accreditation criteria require demonstrations of explicit policy and strategy supporting high impact experiential WIL learning, WIL placement experiences (albeit heavily encouraged and looked favorably upon) lie outside accreditation requirements.

Together the costs, difficulties sourcing placements and lack of accreditation underscore the rare incorporation of compulsory WIL placement in Australian and international business schools. Current non-compulsory placement practices favor high GPA and financially privileged high social capital students (Brooks & Youngson, 2016; Klein & Weiss, 2011; Tomlinson, 2012) producing significant inequities in student learning opportunities, employability skill development and eventually graduate employment for less advantaged cohorts. There has been no incentive for business schools to change the status quo and industry influences have not been sufficiently persuasive to encourage the adoption of compulsory WIL placement.

However, the additional turbulence of growing market disruption, COVID-19, decreasing student enrolments, fiscal implications combined with a shift in government HE strategy, and reduced funding for business schools, will increase pressure on business schools to rethink attitudes and practices to WIL placements.

CHANGING HIGHER EDUCATION LANDSCAPES COULD ENCOURAGE WIL PLACEMENT

In Australia, business schools' traditionally poor engagement with WIL placement is currently being tested by three factors: an increasingly disrupted HE market; the COVID-19 pandemic; and a suite of recent government initiatives; the 2017 Higher Education Reform Package, the 2020 Job-ready Graduates Package followed by the 2021 NPILF.

These factors have intensified HE sector competition in a high-pressure environment of reduced enrolments, decreased sector income and a slowed graduate job market (Hogan, Charles, & Kortt, 2021). As business school students face higher costs through higher student contributions, business schools may need to reconsider their positions on value propositions such as WIL placement for competitive advantage.

Market Disruptions are Challenging Business Schools

Business schools have experienced an image problem stretching over decades. The harshest criticisms have been directed at the relevance of business degrees to business practitioners (Abrahamson et al., 2016; Wilson & Thomas, 2012) with the legitimacy, public value, common good and meaningful impact on society questioned (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2015; Hogan, Charles, & Kortt., 2021). Some commentators have rued the inclusion of business schools at universities, suggesting they contradict university principles, producing unethical graduates focused on wealth creation and profit maximization at the expense of both society and environment (Hogan, Charles, & Kortt, 2021; Muff et al., 2013; Podolny, 2009). Many protagonists contend business schools should be removed from universities and repositioned in trade or vocational schools (Bandera et al., 2019; Murcia et al., 2018; Thomas, 2009). Ironically business schools' historical insurance against removal from universities rests not with the intellectual offerings of the discipline, but their financial contributions which subsidize research and less profitable disciplines (Hogan, Charles,& Kortt., 2021).

Non-institutional based business schools are becoming more difficult to ignore. University business schools facing escalating market disruption, principally related to a sharp and sudden rise in aggressive online HE competitors who recognize the profitability of offering faster business qualifications at less cost (Hogan, Charles, & Kortt, 2021; Kaplan, 2018; Sinha, 2019). In 2019 the Australian Industry Group (AIG) reported that short, targeted credentials such as certificates of completion, micro-masters, certificate programs, badges, nano-degrees and MOOC-based certificates offered by non-institutional providers are flourishing and represent a growing threat for universities (Taylor, 2019). Market entry for these competitors has been made possible by the low barriers to entry for this style of education. Keeping business schools competitive and viable in such a cutthroat, increasingly digitized, massified and globalized market has deeply concerned business schools for some time (Bandera et al., 2019; Dollinger & Brown, 2019). Compulsory WIL placement may not be a silver bullet but as a universal education strategy it can help combat and offset this external market threat.

COVID-19 has Created Financial Pain

Pre COVID-19, as the fourth largest Australian export, international education contributed over AUD$40 billion to the economy with business schools generating AUD$15 billion of that annual revenue, to earn the reputation of 'cash cows' (Green et al., 2017; Hogan, Charles, & Kortt., 2021). However, COVID-19 travel and quarantine restrictions heavily impacted profitable international student enrolments, resulting in a substantial fall in HE sector income (Carnegie et al., 2022) and in some cases deep financial losses. With Australia reported to be the "most dependent on international

student tuition income amongst OECD nations" (Houghton et al., 2021, p. 3), current modelling is predicting a HE revenue loss of between AUD$16-19 billion annually by 2023 (Ross, 2020; Thatcher et al., 2020).

Domestic enrolments have also fallen (Carnegie et al., 2022) leaving HE scrambling to find ways to address cash flow difficulties and budget deficits which have followed the COVID-19 economic downturn and resulted in university restructures, redundancies and reduced capital works (Parker et al., 2021). As a result, the expense of delivering existing or planning future compulsory WIL placement programs will likely be scrutinized for savings. Potentially, less expensive non-placement WIL alternatives will appear more attractive in a time of squeezed budgets, regardless of the benefits.

HIGHER EDUCATION INITIATIVES FOCUS ON EMPLOYABILITY AND WIL PLACEMENT

Returning the Australian economy to more desirable levels of activity in the COVID-19 aftermath will require fresh and innovative recovery HE strategies to deliver on graduate employability and employment (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021), best delivered via WIL placement programs (Aprile & Knight, 2020). In line with the UK experience where WIL placement is seen as a significant and central tenet of HE employability strategies and agendas (Allen et al., 2013), the Australian government is using new HE performance-based funding models to concentrate efforts on graduate employability skill development and direct HE behavior towards stronger WIL engagement.

The Higher Education Reform Package

The Higher Education Reform Package changed existing funding allocations to Commonwealth supported places through the Commonwealth Grant Scheme effective from 2021. The package was purpose-designed to drive students towards STEM based disciplines by "introducing a price signal to students by making degrees cheaper in areas of expected job growth" ("Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020," Cth).

Australian universities are funded at per-student rates set by the Australian government. The government then recovers part of this funding (the student contribution) through an income-dependent deferred tax payment; the balance (the government contribution) is funding from the government. Through the package, the category to which business school subjects mostly belong is known as 'Band 4' courses (also including law, accounting, administration, economics, commerce, communications, and society and culture), had the overall funding rate increased, but the government contributions were reduced by more than half. Previously business schools received AUD$13,592 per student which comprised AUD$11,355 from the student and AUD$2,237 from the government. From 2021 business schools receive AUD$15,600 per student, AUD$14,500 contribution from the student and AUD$1,100 from the government (Houghton et al., 2021).

Deeper analysis of the funding effects of this initiative reveals the business school windfall is perhaps even bigger than it initially appears. Deloittes examined the cost of education in Australian business schools and found based on five years' data, business degrees are estimated on average to cost around A$15,000 per equivalent full-time student (Deloitte Access Economics, 2019) but surmise this figure may be "potentially significantly in excess of the costs incurred in providing an undergraduate education per Full time equivalent (FTE) domestic student" (Houghton et al., 2021, p. 28). Given business schools heavily cross-subsidize other discipline expenditure (Hogan, Charles, & Kortt, 2021), (which the Australian Business Deans Council (2016) noted has been the case for many years), with the increase in per-student funding, there is financial scope and capacity to add value to business degrees

for students, and cross-subsidize the introduction of compulsory WIL placement and support for disadvantaged students should they choose to do so. Fittingly, the increase from A$13,592 to A$15,600 overall represents a 14.7% increase which is commensurate to the 15-21% additional costs of WIL placement (Winchester-Seeto, 2019).

The new funding model is a favorable scenario for business schools who maintain or increase current enrolments, but the windfall for business schools is not a windfall for business students. The cost to students for studying a business degree has risen by 27.7%, an increase affecting all business degrees. Compulsory WIL placement may boost the perceived and actual value of a business degree but of concern are the disadvantaged students who ironically have the least access yet benefit most from WIL placement programs (DeClou et al., 2013; Nunley et al., 2016). Considering the clear signposting from the Australian government that employability skills and graduate employability are an area of significant priority, the NPILF may help address this imbalance by driving business schools towards WIL placement agendas.

The Job-Ready Graduates Package Higher Education Reform Package 2020

The Job-ready package was designed by the DESE to "ensure graduates have the job ready skills and experience they will need in a challenging labour market" (2020, p. 3) across the entire HE sector. Through funding reforms, the package draws attention to the need for universities and industry to create "effective work placement opportunities" (p. 7) by focusing on two aspects: increased industry-university collaborations and addressing fairness and equity in disadvantaged cohorts.

These measures further demonstrate government's approach to raising graduate employability skill levels through WIL placement, while the targeted interest in disadvantaged cohorts fit well with the potential of a compulsory WIL placement, to level the playing field.

The National Priorities and Industry Linkage Fund

The NPILF is a government initiative designed to increase graduate job readiness through three priorities:

1. increase the number of internships, practicums, and other innovative approaches to work-integrated learning;
2. increase the number of STEM-skilled graduates and improve their employment outcomes; and
3. supporting universities for the development of partnerships and collaborations with industry.

Acknowledging some general HE complexities, DESE notes COVID-19 has highlighted job-readiness and states the way forward "must be combined with ensuring real experience of graduates in applying their skills directly in the workplace and an ability to identify and access ongoing reskilling and upskilling" (Australian Government Department of Edcuatin Skills and Employment, 2020, p. 3). If the NPILF is the beginning of ongoing funding policies to foster stronger graduate employment and employability, a compulsory WIL placement approach is well positioned to produce the results the government initiatives are seeking. To navigate the new funding model effectively and reduce funding vulnerability, business schools will need to properly embrace WIL placement. The low enrolment and falling income in the last few years reinforces why business schools should seize any potential funding opportunities. The NPILF offers business schools a unique opportunity to capture a slice of the NPILF funding on offer and use it to cultivate and invest in compulsory WIL placement to benefit every student.

COMPULSORY WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING PLACEMENT – A SILVER BULLET?

The NPILF has several practical implications. Broadly it presents a rare freedom to create equitable and inclusive placement opportunities for the most disadvantaged students. At the same time, this strategy has potential to pay dividends to business schools by making business degrees more attractive to a wider audience through a significant value-add that improves employability skills and graduate employment prospects for all students considering a business degree.

Business schools could achieve both outcomes by channeling the windfall income derived from changing priorities and new funding models to invest in compulsory WIL placement strategies which the value-add will help offset the market disruption from HE competitors.

In essence, the solution to equity and inclusivity is elegant:

1. invest the per student funding windfall from the HE Reforms into compulsory WIL placement;
2. direct NPILF funding to support disadvantaged students who will benefit the most from compulsory WIL placement; and
3. use evidence of success of this approach to secure future NPILF funding.

At a time of fiscal restraint and university job cuts, supporting employability skills development and investment in compulsory WIL placement by business schools will not be a popular spend and many will argue the financial capacity to resource this does not exist. However, as the funding and marketing landscapes also move to prioritize employability outcomes, a future without compulsory WIL placement is no longer sustainable. The business school conundrum of long-term sustainability is inextricably linked to employability skills and graduate employability outcomes for all students which strong, compulsory WIL placement programs deliver.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future empirical work to investigate the implementation of compulsory WIL placement and build on current knowledge is needed. Priorities to consider are a better understanding of resources needed to overcome existing barriers to implementing compulsory WIL placement in conjunction with an investigation into key enablers for the major stakeholders. Similarly, it is also important to examine the negative impacts of compulsory WIL. Finally on the basis that some business schools will adopt compulsory WIL placement, consideration needs to be given to the key graduate employability metrics needed to measure compulsory WIL program effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

For Australian business schools the confluence of internal factors (costs, placement scarcity, lack of accreditation) and external pressures (market disruption, COVID-19 and performance-based funding strategies) are creating a perfect storm for WIL placement. Many of these conditions are ubiquitous globally, heralding the need for business schools worldwide to reconsider deeply entrenched WIL placement attitudes and outdated practices.

Unquestionably compulsory WIL placement is a wicked problem, but it has the extraordinary ability to solve the challenge of inclusivity and equity for all students and prevent business degrees from remaining the domain of the elite. Non-compulsory WIL placement penalizes already disadvantaged cohorts and encourages a discriminatory business school model favoring high GPA, high SES and high social capital students. Although supporting compulsory WIL placement has positive trickle-down

effects for all stakeholders and may solve sustainability issues for business schools, quite simply the imperative to implementing compulsory WIL placement is that it is the right thing for the students, and the right thing by the students.

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About the Journal

The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning (IJWIL) publishes double-blind peer-reviewed original research and topical issues dealing with Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). IJWIL first published in 2000 under the name of Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education (APJCE). Since then the readership and authorship has become more international and terminology usage in the literature has favored the broader term of WIL, in 2018 the journal name was changed to the International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning.

In this Journal, WIL is defined as "*an educational approach that uses relevant work-based experiences to allow students to integrate theory with the meaningful practice of work as an intentional component of the curriculum. Defining elements of this educational approach requires that students engage in authentic and meaningful work-related task, and must involve three stakeholders; the student, the university, and the workplace"*. Examples of practice include off-campus, workplace immersion activities such as work placements, internships, practicum, service learning, and cooperative education (Co-op), and on-campus activities such as work-related projects/competitions, entrepreneurships, student-led enterprise, etc. WIL is related to, but not the same as, the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training.

The Journal's main aim is to enable specialists working in WIL to disseminate research findings and share knowledge to the benefit of institutions, students, co-op/WIL practitioners, and researchers. The Journal desires to encourage quality research and explorative critical discussion that leads to the advancement of effective practices, development of further understanding of WIL, and promote further research.

The Journal is ongoing financially supported by the Work-Integrated Learning New Zealand (WILNZ; www.wilnz.nz), and the University of Waikato, New Zealand, and received periodic sponsorship from the Australian Collaborative Education Network (ACEN) and the World Association of Cooperative Education (WACE).

Types of Manuscripts Sought by the Journal

Types of manuscripts sought by IJWIL is primarily of two forms: 1) *research publications* describing research into aspects of work-integrated learning and, 2) *topical discussion* articles that review relevant literature and provide critical explorative discussion around a topical issue. The journal will, on occasions, consider good practice submissions.

Research publications should contain; an introduction that describes relevant literature and sets the context of the inquiry. A detailed description and justification for the methodology employed. A description of the research findings - tabulated as appropriate, a discussion of the importance of the findings including their significance to current established literature, implications for practitioners and researchers, whilst remaining mindful of the limitations of the data, and a conclusion preferably including suggestions for further research.

Topical discussion articles should contain a clear statement of the topic or issue under discussion, reference to relevant literature, critical and scholarly discussion on the importance of the issues, critical insights to how to advance the issue further, and implications for other researchers and practitioners.

Good practice and program description papers. On occasions, the Journal also seeks manuscripts describing a practice of WIL as an example of good practice, however, only if it presents a particularly unique or innovative practice or was situated in an unusual context. There must be a clear contribution of new knowledge to the established literature. Manuscripts describing what is essentially 'typical', 'common' or 'known' practices will be encouraged to rewrite the focus of the manuscript to a significant educational issue or will be encouraged to publish their work via another avenue that seeks such content.

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