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Denise Jackson
Edith Cowan University, d.jackson@ecu.edu.au

David Rowbottom

Sonia Ferns

Diane McLaren

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Employer understanding of work-integrated learning and the challenges of engaging in work placement opportunities

Abstract

This study examines employer understanding of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), reasons for participation and the challenges and barriers posed during the WIL process. This is important given the drive to grow WIL, augmented by the National Strategy for WIL, and the significant benefits it holds in preparing students for their transition to employment. The study was undertaken by the four publicly-funded Western Australian universities, in partnership with the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Western Australia, and is focused on work placements among business students. Findings indicate employers had very little understanding of WIL offerings at the four Business Schools. While employers generally believed that student work placements are useful for their industry sectors, a number of issues impacted on their engagement in WIL. These included identifying suitable projects and tasks for students to complete; sourcing suitable students; concerns with student performance and capacity to mentor/supervise. A combination of quantitative and qualitative research tools were used with data gathered by an employer survey ($N=112$) and focus group sessions ($N=17$). The study recommends a number of ways to alleviate barriers and challenges to improve the WIL experience for all stakeholders and ensure the sustained growth of WIL in the higher education sector.

Key words

Work Integrated Learning; employer engagement; work-readiness; work placements; industry collaboration.

Introduction

Economies require highly trained workforces who are productive, efficient and appropriately skilled in order to maintain globally competitive industries (PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PwC) 2016). The content-focused undergraduate business degree is no longer considered by industry to be a sufficient requirement for entry into the workforce. Business, in comparison with other disciplines such as health and engineering, often lacks a core element dedicated to gaining experience in a professional setting and demonstrating preparedness for employment (Smith et al. 2014). Employers are now demanding graduate applicants have relevant experience, evidence of work-readiness and the non-technical skills to operate effectively in the workplace (Edwards et al. 2015). This is particularly important for organisations to be innovative and remain competitive in global markets (PwC 2016). In response to these employer needs, and their call for graduates with relevant work experience (PwC 2016), universities are increasingly focusing on incorporating Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) into undergraduate programs across a broad range of business disciplines.

In Australia, the commonly held term for work-related opportunities during university studies is WIL. WIL refers to a range of activities which connect industry with education and allow students to apply their theoretical knowledge in a practical setting. The terms ‘experiential learning’, ‘work-based learning’, ‘professional learning’ and ‘cooperative education’ are used synonymously and broadly comprises ‘placement’ and ‘non-placement’ WIL. The former includes internships, work placements and practicums where students gain hands-on experience in a work setting. Non-placement WIL, such as industry-based projects and simulations, connects students with industry in an authentic learning experience in a campus setting. Both forms of WIL aim to develop ‘professional practice capabilities’ in students (Pilgrim 2012, 1).

The purpose of WIL is ‘to develop a coherent approach to build workforce capability, skills and individual prospects’ (Universities Australia 2015, 1). It is increasingly recognised as a valuable tool for developing knowledgeable and skilled graduates who are suitably prepared to perform successfully in the workplace. WIL enables students to gain insight into the realities of their chosen career (Accenture 2013) and connect theory with practice while applying acquired disciplinary knowledge in the workplace (AWPA 2013; Smith et al. 2014). Students may improve their understanding of ethical behaviour and professional conduct (Woodley and Beattie 2011); develop their non-technical skills (AWPA 2013; Smith and Worsfold 2014) and improve their capabilities in career self-management (Smith et al. 2009). These culminate to help prepare students for their transition from higher education to the workplace, a sometimes complex and confusing process (see Nystrom et al. 2008), and navigate an employment context characterised by uncertainty and change (PwC 2016). Further, evidence suggests WIL can improve student employment prospects (Smith et al. 2014).

Despite the benefits of participating in WIL for universities, industry and student stakeholders, barriers exist which prevent some employers from engaging in WIL opportunities or hinder the extent to which they participate. This study explored the employer’s perspective of such barriers in the Western Australian (WA) context. It was undertaken collaboratively by the four publicly-funded WA universities, in partnership with the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of WA (CCIWA). Specifically, the research objectives were to (i) evaluate employer understanding of WIL and the different WIL opportunities available through the Business Schools in the four publicly-funded Western Australian universities; (ii) identify why employers engage in WIL and how often they participate; (iii) develop an understanding of the challenges WIL can pose for hosts and the barriers which prevent employers from participating; and (iv) identify strategies for overcoming barriers and challenges to improve the WIL

experience for all stakeholders. Data were gathered in a survey of employers and focus group sessions to address the defined objectives. The paper is structured to first provide a background review of known barriers to employer participation in WIL, followed by an outline of adopted methodology, results and discussion of the findings. Some recommendations for stakeholders to improve WIL are then presented for consideration.

The study was initiated by CCIWA in response to a broader call by the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry to develop pathways to improve workforce productivity, particularly among new graduates. The collaboration of local universities to improve WIL in their local context is fairly unique, particularly in light of competitiveness in securing work placements in the higher education sector with student demand often exceeding the supply of opportunities (Department of Industry 2014). The study makes a contribution to the field through both its exploration of perceptions specific to a certain region and its broad scope of examination of employers who both have and have not hosted students on work placement. It also captures any nuances in the challenges, barriers and pathways for improving WIL which are specific to the business-related disciplines.

Barriers to employers engaging in WIL

As the popularity of WIL increases, a larger number of employers will be needed to meet the demand for WIL placements. Barriers are known to exist that may limit the extent to which employers engage in WIL. A lack of shared understanding among employers of what WIL entails and how to get involved has been reported as a major barrier (Department of Industry 2014). Additionally, insufficient resources for coordinating WIL placements, especially the supervision of students while in the workplace has been recognised (Department of Industry 2014). Further, some organisations have been unable to locate a suitably skilled

student or one that can attend the workplace at the particular time required in their business cycle (AWPA 2014). There can also be a misalignment between employer and university expectations on the purpose and nature of the WIL experience (Patrick et al. 2009).

Shared understanding of WIL

Many lament the lack of shared understanding of the meaning and purpose of WIL among stakeholders (Martin and Leberman 2005; Patrick et al. 2009). This is aggravated by the array of terminology applied to WIL, including work-based learning, experiential learning, professional learning, cooperative education, service learning and community-based learning. Further, there is uncertainty surrounding the precise nature of different WIL practices, in particular practicums, placements and internships (Patrick et al. 2009). Although WIL is a commonly-used term in Australia (Patrick et al. 2009), many employers remain unfamiliar with its meaning (Department of Industry 2014). The need to agree on a common language and interpretation of WIL, among all stakeholders, features in Australia's National Strategy for WIL (Universities Australia 2015).

Smith et al. (2006) argue a shared vision for WIL should not be assumed and found three areas where university WIL coordinators' and host employers' expectations of the nature and purpose of WIL differed significantly. These were the level of commitment of host employers to WIL activities and their understanding of what WIL actually involves; the capacity of assigned mentors and supervisors to undertake their roles effectively; and what constitutes a quality placement and how this can be achieved. Furthermore, Smith et al (2014) recommended that university and industry partnerships should be 'structured, intentional and resourced' (77).

Accessing WIL for employers

While collaborative partnerships between universities and local employers are essential for the success of WIL (BHEF 2013; Wilson 2012), Australia ranks only 29 out of 30 (OECD 2013) for industry-university collaboration on innovation. This may be attributed in part to a lack of mobility between the university and higher education sectors (PwC 2016). Sustainable partnerships between industry and universities for the purposes of WIL can be ‘deeply problematic’ and take considerable time to negotiate (Choy and Delahaye 2011). Employers may find it difficult to locate appropriate WIL contacts in local universities (Patrick et al. 2009) or rely on universities to make contact with them regarding WIL activities (Department of Industry 2014). The myriad of different WIL offerings and engagement approaches across local universities may cause further confusion and hinder partnerships. There appears to be a relative lack of uniformity among Australian WIL offerings in comparison to, for example, the UK which typically operates ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ sandwich degree formats (Ward et al. 2012). Establishing mutually beneficial partnerships with local universities can be particularly problematic for smaller businesses (Mendelsohn et al. 2011) and evidence suggests employers tend to favour collaborating with only one university once a partnership is established (Sattler and Peters 2012).

Lack of resourcing

There are significant costs associated with implementing quality WIL programs. It has been estimated that the cost of a three month work placement is \$8,100 plus Goods and Services Tax (AWPA 2013). These costs include monitoring the quality of work undertaken, liaising with university partners and mentoring and supervising the student (see AWPA 2013). This cost may be particularly problematic during periods of economic downturn where organisations are operating on lean financial models. Furthermore, the demands of hosting WIL

students is challenging for smaller organisations where typically personnel perform multiple functions with little time to support student learning. These high costs extend to students who may incur costs for travel, clothing and childcare and are less able to maintain part-time employment during the WIL experience (see Bates 2005; Moore et al 2015). For universities, careful monitoring of students at different work sites is required, in addition to administration for risk management (Patrick et al., 2009). While the greater costs associated with WIL units was confirmed by DEEWR (2011), exacts costs are difficult to estimate due to the ad-hoc nature of individual placements and difficulties in gauging the level of administration and coordination required (Clark et al. 2014). Given under-resourced WIL placements can be highly problematic (Patrick et al. 2009) and quality WIL curricula is critical (Smith 2012; Smith and Worsfold 2014; Smith et al. 2014), the lack of funding for WIL requires urgent attention (AWPA 2013).

Lack of availability of suitable students

There is evidence to suggest a lack of awareness among students of available WIL opportunities (AWPA 2014), attributed to a lack of funding allocated to promoting WIL (Edwards et al. 2015). This can result in a shortage of suitable students being available for work placement opportunities. Indeed, some employers have reported that those students that were available were insufficiently skilled to take on work designated as WIL activities (Department of Industry 2014; Sattler and Peters 2012). Also problematic is that the timing of WIL activities does not always coincide with the needs of the business (van Rooijen 2011). Organisations also sometimes disengage from WIL as they lack suitable work for the students which are available for WIL (Sattler and Peters 2012).

Compliance with Fair Work Act

The compliance of unpaid internships with employment legislation has been the focus of recent media attention (see for example, Innis 2015), where they are not a formal component of a student's learning program. To address this requirement, it is important that unpaid WIL experiences are embedded in curriculum and form part of the formal learning experiences. They should comprise quality support mechanisms where students' learning is evidenced by rigorous assessment, particularly those focused on reflective practices (Sykes and Dean 2013). WIL should be perceived as a learning opportunity for students and not necessarily contribute to tangible outcomes for which host organisations would normally pay. This may pose problems for small and medium enterprises who may be interested in participating in WIL, particularly for harnessing creativity, but lack the infrastructure and resources to meet the requirements of a quality placement, particularly in relation to supervision and mentoring (AWPA 2013; Department of Industry 2014).

Misalignment in expectations

Different reasons for stakeholders engaging in WIL can create tension and cause disengagement from WIL activities (Patrick et al. 2009). Pilgrim (2012) argues for a clearer understanding of the motivations of other stakeholders, and trying to shape WIL processes for the benefit of all parties, is critical for growing WIL. Similarly, a triadic approach to WIL, whereby students, university coordinators, and workplace supervisors work in close collaboration to maximise the experience, is promoted by Dalrymple et al. (2014).

Method

Procedures

Employer opinion was canvassed through a survey and focus group sessions. Respondents were invited to complete the online survey in late 2014. Approximately 4100 members of CCIWA members were emailed information about the survey and a link for electronic completion. To complement this sample, organisations that were known to participate in WIL were contacted directly via email by university WIL coordinators. Targeting organisations which participated in WIL was necessary to generate data that addressed the research objectives, despite not representing a cross-section of local employers. Survey respondents were asked to provide their email address if they were interested in participating in a focus group session. Two focus groups were subsequently formed and both sessions were held during February 2015 in the CCIWA offices. Ethics approval for the study was granted in August 2014.

Participants

Table 1 summarises the characteristics of the 118 employers participating in the survey. A significant majority were from private-sector organisations and half were from small businesses. The sample had representation from a wide range of business sectors including Finance and Insurance (20%), Health and Community Services (15%), Mining, Personal Services and Education (11-15% each). The primary location of the participating businesses was the Perth metropolitan area and responses were derived from a broad spectrum of job positions. A prerequisite for participating in the study was for the employer to have hosted, or have the potential to host, university business students on a work placement. Employers who had hosted students from the Vocational Education (VET) sector or from non-business disciplines were not included.

The two focus groups comprised the CCIWA Project Coordinator, academic representatives from the four participating universities and a total of twelve employers located in Perth. Seventeen WIL stakeholders participated in the sessions in total. Employers who participated in the focus group were all based in the Perth metropolitan area and were from a range of different organisational contexts, including the private, public and not-for-profit sectors as well as small (< 49 employees) and large (>150 employees) organisations. Some had previously hosted business students and others had not (see Table 1).

[Insert Table 1]

Measures and analysis

A combination of quantitative and qualitative research tools were used to gather data, allowing for both the generalisation of findings, yet still providing a rich picture of stakeholder perspectives on WIL. The employer survey focused on work placements for business students. These were defined as undergraduate or postgraduate students studying in the following areas: marketing, events management, accounting, finance, economics/policy, logistics/supply chain, business law, tourism and hospitality management, sports and recreation management, human resource management/industrial relations and general management. Work placements across the four universities were typically conducted during the academic cycle for 100 to 150 hours duration. Participants were initially asked to respond to a number of questions about their business or organisation. Subsequent questions explored employers' awareness of what WIL means and their knowledge of opportunities to partner with local universities in WIL. Employers were asked to comment on their main reason for engaging in WIL and the perceived usefulness of WIL to their organisation. Those who had hosted a business student before were asked to rate various aspects of the experience, particularly in relation to challenges, mentoring and supervisory arrangements. Barriers to WIL were examined for those who had not

previously hosted business students. Results were analysed using SPSS for numerical responses and thematic analysis, within Microsoft Excel, for open-ended questions. Two focus group sessions, each of two hours duration, explored strategies for managing the barriers and challenges of WIL; developing stakeholder awareness of WIL and identifying ways to improve WIL experiences for all stakeholders.

Results and discussion

Understanding WIL

When asked to rate the extent to which they understood the different WIL programs offered by the Business Schools in the four publicly-funded universities in WA, the majority of employers (66%) had very little or no understanding of what was on offer. Findings indicated the most common way they had gathered information on WIL was via academics responsible for coordinating WIL programs or through their established contact(s) within the university. Third-party bodies and associations also appeared to have played some role in communicating information about WIL locally. Participants were asked to rate the usefulness of work placements to their industry sector on a five-point scale, where 1 indicated ‘not useful at all’ and 5 indicated ‘extremely useful’. The mean rating was 3.70 with a standard deviation of .812 indicating that, on average, employers believed work placements were useful. In line with previous studies (see, for example, Smith et al. 2014), focus group participants felt WIL provided students with invaluable networking opportunities and it introduced them to contemporary working practices and the realities of the professional setting.

Participating in WIL

Employers appeared to be motivated by the long-term benefits of WIL to their business or industry sector. Many cited the supply of skilled graduates and the creation of a suitable

talent pool as their main reasons for participation, supporting the growing call among employers for work-ready graduates who can contribute to growth and innovation (PwC 2016). Of the 118 employers, 44% had previously hosted a business student on placement, 44% had not and 12% were unsure. Of those who had hosted, 78% hosted one to three business students per year. Human Resource Management (HRM), Marketing/Public Relations and Finance/Accounting were the most popular areas for business placements. This may have been driven by proportionately higher numbers of students enrolled in these areas or a greater number of requests by industry for these types of students to meet their business needs.

Thirty nine percent of host organisations used more than one university, 40% used only one and 21% were unsure. Reasons provided for collaborating with only one university varied considerably and included; managing the different occupational safety and health (OSH) and risk management processes; a lack of capacity to engage with different universities; a lack of placement opportunities for more than one university; loyalty to one particular institution; and not being approached by others.

Challenges during WIL

Employers who hosted business students were asked to rate the degree of challenge posed by eight different aspects of the work placement process (see Table 2). Employers regularly noted the identification of suitable projects as being particularly problematic with over 60% of respondents rating this as being ‘challenging’, ‘very challenging’ or ‘extremely challenging’. Over 60% of respondents also highlighted that locating a suitable student was ‘challenging’, ‘very challenging’ or ‘extremely challenging’. During the focus groups, employers noted high levels of confidence, English language competence and adequate levels of experience in the students’ intended area of work (academic major) as particularly important

when selecting a student. These align with recent reports on the priority areas when employers recruit and select new graduate recruits (Australian Association Graduate Employers 2014; Graduate Careers Australia 2014).

[Insert Table 2]

Approximately half of the survey respondents rated student performance and the quality of work produced as at least ‘challenging’. Issues with work output were also cited as problematic during the focus groups. Areas of particular weakness for students were identified as oral presentations, grammar and spelling, attention to detail and report writing. This aligns with Smith et al.’s (2014) study who found students from business-related fields scored relatively lower in several employability dimensions in relation to other discipline groups. Focus group discussions indicated employers felt students were focused on producing ‘academic’ reports rather than ones which identified issues and incorporated practical recommendations on how to improve current organisational practices. Possible causes were a lack of collaboration between industry and university staff or university staff not listening, not responding to industry needs and/or not seeking their advice on curriculum. The decline in university contact hours and less rigorous units and courses than in previous years were also considered to be contributing factors by the focus group participants. It is important to note that employers who are more involved in the supervision, feedback and mentoring of work placement students, tend to appraise them as more capable (Smith et al. 2014).

Identifying suitable mentors and supervisors and engaging staff and management with work placements were considered to be at least ‘challenging’ by more than one third of respondents. This raises serious concerns given organisational capacity to provide adequate mentoring and supervision is an important element of any quality WIL experience (Smith et al.

2014; Smith and Worsfold 2015). According to respondents, the responsibility for mentoring and supervising placement students typically falls on intermediate management, although both junior and senior management were reported to have had some involvement. Results indicate that managing risk and OSH during work placements, and its associated paperwork, were the least challenging aspects for employers. One active host commented in the survey, however, that the onerous levels of some universities' paperwork could be a deterrent to engaging in WIL, particularly where administrative assistance was not available within the organisation.

Focus group discussions highlighted the importance of clarifying student and employer expectations prior to commencing placements. It was believed that ensuring they were appropriately aligned was pivotal to a positive learning experience. Student inability to effectively manage work-life balance was noted as problematic by some employers during the focus groups, aligning with previous research in this area (Jackson 2015). Student ability to manage client confidentiality was also a concern and this has been previously flagged, particularly in relation to assessment where students offer gather evidence for professional practice portfolios (McNamara 2013). The timing and structure of placements posed issues with some believing the typical 100 to 150 hour placement to be too short. Some expressed a preference for a block format instead of the typical one day per week structure often preferred by universities. Reasons provided included assisting in maintaining flow and continuity and helping to settle students into the routine of work. The difficulties a block format creates for students who are engaged in other university subjects and part-time employment during the semester cycle was also raised.

Barriers to engaging in WIL

Survey respondents who had not previously hosted business students ($N=72$) were asked to rate the extent to which certain barriers prevented them from engaging with work placements. A five-point rating scale was used where 1 indicated ‘not a barrier at all’ and 5 indicated a ‘significant barrier’. The highest mean ratings were recorded for their capacity to mentor/supervise, identifying suitable projects and not being approached by universities scored (Table 3). Almost half the respondents rated the volume of risk and OSH paperwork with a score of three or above. Concerns with student performance also feature as a barrier to participating in WIL with approximately half the sample assigning a rating of three and above. Relatively low ratings were assigned to the organisation being unsuitable, previous negative experiences and being registered but not provided with a student. During the focus group sessions, concerns were expressed about confidentiality, computer literacy, distance from the universities, organisations undergoing significant change and therefore not able to provide an appropriate learning environment, and finally, difficulty obtaining information about courses involving WIL and the types of students available.

[Insert Table 3]

Recommendations to improve WIL

It is critical that all stakeholders work collaboratively to improve the WIL experience and outcomes for students, employers and universities. Industry-university collaboration is critical for developing graduate work-readiness (PwC 2016). To reduce the barriers to employers participating in WIL, a number of recommendations are detailed below. While these are specific in nature, they fall within the greater context of developing sustainable partnerships in WIL. WIL is not a “tokenistic engagement with the workplace” (p.2), but an intentional pedagogy that blends theoretical content with workplace practices (Ferns, Campbell and

Zegwaard, 2014). These authors posit the ‘boundaries of the university as permeable’ (p.2) whereby industry and universities nurture robust partnerships which inform curriculum ensuring an authentic student experience and the development of employability capabilities. Several national reports highlight industry’s willingness to engage in WIL and make recommendations to support them in their endeavours (AWPA, 2014; Department of Industry, 2014; Smith et al. 2014). A consistent theme evident in the publications resulting from these projects is that the strongest influence on industry’s involvement in WIL is the support, communication and connection between universities and employers. The development of industry-focused resources, streamlined governance processes and clear communication channels are strategies for addressing this need and currently under development or in discussion.

Recommendations to universities

First, universities need to be doing far more to inform industry of the WIL activities available and how they might become involved. Alumni and university websites emerged in the survey as underutilised avenues for disseminating WIL opportunities and areas where universities may wish to concentrate future efforts. Working collaboratively with third parties – such as local Chambers of Commerce, small business centres and professional associations – may also be effective for distributing information on WIL more widely. Focus group participants suggested the creation of promotional material and case studies which outline both the short and long-term benefits of WIL would assist in engaging local employers. Directing potential employers to relevant excerpts of the National Strategy for WIL will highlight the national focus and momentum in this area and may clarify the broader benefits of WIL on economic performance. Importantly, there should be clear and current information on whom to contact in relation to participating in WIL. Universities should establish central points of

contact for WIL at University, Faculty or School level, to direct potential host employers to the relevant academics and/or professional staff.

Several strategies were identified during the focus groups for universities to better engage management and staff with the concept and processes of WIL. These included: creating case studies on WIL to clarify precisely what it entails and the benefits to be gained; highlighting to management and staff the role of WIL for piloting graduate, vacation and cadet programs; reiterating WIL as a means of securing quality talent ahead of competitors; highlighting the use of WIL for completing delayed or shelved projects; emphasising the professional development opportunities for staff who are less experienced in mentoring and supervising; and highlighting it as a means of becoming an employer of choice.

Locating suitable students is critical to the success of placement opportunities offered by host organisations. From a university perspective it is apparent that WIL opportunities need to be better disseminated across the student cohort to ensure broader awareness of availability, how to get involved and the potential impact on employment prospects. This could be achieved by universities through social media, events and networks such as career centres and the university guild. A rigorous application process, including an interview with WIL coordinators and career centre staff was considered important to ensure students are properly prepared for potential host interviews. Inducting students on what is expected in relation to learning in the workplace, professional etiquette, conduct and tasks to be completed will better prepare them for their WIL experience. Scaffolding learning across degree programs so WIL participants are adequately trained in oral presentations and report writing prior to placement requires coordination and the integration of WIL at the course level.

The volume of risk and OSH administration appears to be a barrier to those considering work placements. Nevertheless, results indicated that those already involved in work placements did not find the paperwork too cumbersome. Evidently, perceptions of what is involved may negatively impact on an organisation's decision to host students. Clarification of the administrative responsibilities and consistency of approaches relating to WIL is required when promoting programs to local employers.

Recommendations for WIL educators

Survey results indicated that current hosts appear to be entering WIL arrangements with a focus on long term benefits, particularly improving the talent pool available for graduate recruitment. This reiterates the need for quality WIL provision which adheres to good practice principles, such as those outlined by Billet (2011) and Smith (2012), rather than 'quick fix' placements to fill a gap in operational activities for a particular period of time. These good practice principles include authenticity, alignment of activities with learning outcomes, adequate workplace and academic support, access to supervisors and preparation (Smith 2012) and the integration of critical self-evaluation and reflective activities into the WIL experience (Billet 2011; Sykes and Dean 2013). Implementing good practice in WIL requires adequate funding and resourcing.

In response to the survey results indicating that 'identifying suitable projects' was problematic for organisations, focus group participants were encouraged to suggest possible approaches to this challenge. Participants concluded that universities could assist current and potential hosts by developing a range of resources aimed at identifying suitable placement activities. This could be in the form of fact sheets, videos and/or guidelines which address the range of tasks and/or project work suitable for students across a range of business disciplines.

Access to samples of work would help industry clarify the nature, scope and standard of work of which students were capable. Providing potential and active hosts with a 'placement proposal' template which scopes the objectives and strategies of work to be completed, along with intended tangible outcomes, can assist in structuring the focus of the placement.

Given that a significant number of potential host organisations acknowledged uncertainty about their capacity to mentor/supervise, it is recommended that universities provide fact sheets and case studies to inform hosts about appropriate mentoring and feedback processes. This might also encompass guidance on using evaluation forms, informal and formal feedback processes, how to identify and remediate issues and concerns at an early stage and other practices which may enhance student performance. Group discussions highlighted the importance of employers adopting similar processes in their managing of student performance as they would for existing employees. They also acknowledged the need for an early performance review to revise and manage expectations, identify any significant problems, and potentially mechanisms whereby the student can withdraw without academic penalty if the employer wishes to opt out of the placement at this early stage. Regular communication with the WIL university coordinator to assess student progress was also considered critical. Participants acknowledged that mentoring should be inspirational and constructive and that poor mentoring techniques can be brand-damaging and cause frustration and anxiety for students.

The use of a 'placement proposal' template which outlines the students' required skills and work to be completed (including objectives, strategies, timeline and outcomes) will assist universities in matching employer requirements with appropriate students. Subsequently presenting students to hosts on an individual basis with a summary of skills and attributes, in

addition to an interview to confirm organisational fit, should improve the matching of placement opportunities to suitable students. It is important to note that some international students may require additional preparation for their placement and increased support while in the workplace. This typically relates to relatively weak language capabilities, cultural issues (see IEAA, 2012) and reported difficulties in undertaken reflective assessment activities (see Prokofieva et al. 2015).

Focus group attendees felt it important to manage employer expectations of the broad capabilities of business students so they can make informed decisions about whether to host and, if so, what project or tasks may be suitable. Again, the use of videos, case studies, placement proposal templates and testimonials were deemed important. Encouraging employers to participate in consultative committees and collaborate on the design of curriculum and teaching and learning methodologies is useful for familiarising the employer with student expectations and ensuring currency of curriculum (Smith et al. 2014). Three way agreements for students, workplace supervisors and university coordinators which outline the responsibilities and expectations of all parties, including confidentiality requirements, can also clarify expectations. Regular discussions between university and workplace WIL coordinators to ensure a clear understanding of organisational needs, and those of particular business areas, will assist in assessing the suitability of programs and students.

Given the fluid nature of contemporary business environments, the assessment of organisation and work areas needs requires regular review. It is the responsibility of academic WIL coordinators to manage student expectations on the type of work to be undertaken, skills required and the level of administrative duties involved. Similarly, the workload associated with WIL programs must be clearly communicated to potential student recruits, highlighting

hourly commitments and the potential impact on part-time employment and caring responsibilities. Placing students in alignment with their particular needs is also important (Moore et al. 2015). For example, minimising the distance students need to travel to the workplace or selecting a placement with flexible working hours may assist those with caring responsibilities.

Focus group participants felt universities needed to better align the availability of students with the business cycles of local sectors and industries. Equally, university staff reiterated the importance of hosts understanding that WIL is an academic program which has associated university semester dates, on-campus sessions for students and assessment requirements which often involve reflective activities and peer engagement. Good practice principles may therefore preclude WIL programs from having the degree of flexibility in placement timeframes that business organisation might prefer. Greater consideration could, however, be paid to adjusting to a block format and introducing lengthier placements beyond the standard 100-hour format. It appears an element of flexibility is required from universities, host organisations as well as students.

Recommendations to WIL employers

The role of mentoring and supervising work placement students has the potential to enhance resumes and improve future job and promotion opportunities of host organisation employees as it demonstrates an ability to lead others. Developing awareness among human resource and senior management staff on the benefits of developing junior and middle management in mentoring roles, with the intention of relieving time-poor senior management, is important for potential and active host organisations. In addition, the benefits of using new graduates as buddies for peer mentoring purposes should be promoted by host organisations.

The latter can benefit placement students who may identify more easily with staff who have recently experienced the transition from university to work, and the professional development of graduate employees. The benefit of rotating students across different areas was also discussed and it was agreed this would expose placement students to different forms of supervision and leadership. Although resource-intensive, and there is a lesser focus on tangible outcomes for the organisation, it also allows hosts to pilot graduate, cadet and vacation programs.

Finally, smaller businesses who may have logistical difficulties accommodating work placement students and regional-based businesses who cannot easily access placement students may wish to consider non-placement WIL and virtual WIL options. This typically involves an industry client briefing a cohort of students on an authentic project which students research and develop under the guidance of a discipline lecturer, in small groups in a campus setting. Selected groups may then present their findings – by oral presentation and/or in report form – to the industry client who provides feedback to students on their process, performance and outcomes. ‘Virtual’ WIL might also be considered; with students participating in work-based, authentic projects using online technologies such as Skype, email, blogs and online chat forums. Projects would have defined outcomes, may be team-based and allow students to interact with and gain feedback from workplace peers, supervisors and mentors.

Conclusion

Key findings from the study were that the majority of respondents had no or very little understanding of WIL programs at the Business Schools in the four public universities in WA. Employers typically accessed information on WIL via pre-established contacts with the university or directly from those who coordinate WIL programs. The main motivation for host

employers was to produce skilled graduates who would form a suitable talent pool for future recruitment needs. Employers generally believed that work placements for students are useful for their industry sectors and often sourced students from more than one local university. Human Resource Management (HRM), Marketing/Public Relations, and Finance/Accounting were the most popular business disciplines for work placements. During placements, intermediate managers were predominantly responsible for mentoring and supervising students.

This study highlighted a number of issues which impact on organisations effective engagement in WIL. In particular, identifying suitable projects and tasks for students to complete; sourcing suitable students and the quality of student performance and the work produced. The main barriers to hosting students on placement were capacity to mentor/supervise, identifying suitable projects, and not being approached by universities. A number of recommendations were presented for stakeholders to overcome challenges during the WIL process and to remove barriers preventing employers from participating in WIL. These highlight the resource intensive nature of WIL and support the wide call for increased funding to sustain and grow WIL in the higher education sector.

Although sufficient to form generalisations, a greater sample of active and potential hosts would have improved the validity and reliability of the observations. It would also facilitate an entirely random sample from CCIWA membership rather than requiring WIL University Coordinators to target organisations known to host business students. The inclusion of open questions for employers to explain assigned ratings and proffer additional barriers and challenges may have produced richer findings. The study was also intentionally limited to business students, while acknowledging that employer awareness, challenges and barriers may

differ across other disciplines. Areas for future research include managing the challenges of work placements in certain organisation types and sectors, particularly smaller businesses. Extending the study to examine other regions in Australia, and indeed globally, would be instructive. In addition, a focus on non-placement WIL would improve our understanding of how WIL might evolve in the future.

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Table 1 Profile of survey respondents (N=118)

Variable	Sub-grouping	Frequency	Valid %
Organisation type	Public sector	26	22
	Private sector	78	66
	Not-for-profit	14	12
Organisation size	1 - 49 (small)	59	50
	50 - 149 (medium)	11	9
	150 + (large)	48	41
Sector	Accommodation, Cafes and Restaurants	1	0.5
	Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing	3	3
	Communications	8	7
	Construction	1	0.5
	Cultural and Recreational Services	1	0.5
	Education	14	12
	Electricity, Gas and Water Supply	3	3
	Finance and Insurance	24	20
	Health and Community Services	18	15
	Manufacturing	5	4
	Mining	13	11
	Personal Services and Other Services	14	12
	Property and Business Services	6	5
	Retail Trade	2	2
	Transport and Storage	2	2
	Wholesale Trade	2	2
	Local government	1	0.5
	Location	Metropolitan centre (i.e. Perth)	108
Regional city (i.e. Bunbury)		8	7
Rural town (i.e. Waroona)		2	2
Position in business	Owner	26	22
	Director	14	12
	Line Manager	27	23
	HRM, Manager/Officer	37	31
	Field-based role	14	12

Table 2 Degree of challenge posed by different aspects of work placements

Challenge	Rating	Frequency	%
Assigning a suitable mentor/supervisor	Not very challenging at all	6	12.8
	Not very challenging	24	51.0
	Challenging	10	21.3
	Very challenging	6	12.8
	Extremely challenging	1	2.1
Managing the OSH, risk, confidentiality and IP paperwork	Not very challenging at all	11	23.4
	Not very challenging	27	57.4
	Challenging	6	12.8
	Very challenging	3	6.4
	Extremely challenging	0	0
Managing OSH and risk during placement	Not very challenging at all	12	25.5
	Not very challenging	30	63.9
	Challenging	4	8.5
	Very challenging	1	2.1
	Extremely challenging	0	0
Identifying suitable projects	Not very challenging at all	2	4.3
	Not very challenging	16	34.0
	Challenging	20	42.6
	Very challenging	8	17.0
	Extremely challenging	1	2.1
Engaging staff	Not very challenging at all	5	10.6
	Not very challenging	25	53.1
	Challenging	13	27.7
	Very challenging	2	4.3
	Extremely challenging	2	4.3
Engaging management	Not very challenging at all	7	14.9
	Not very challenging	22	46.8
	Challenging	11	23.4
	Very challenging	5	10.6
	Extremely challenging	2	4.3
Locating suitable students	Not very challenging at all	5	10.6
	Not very challenging	13	27.7
	Challenging	19	40.4
	Very challenging	7	14.9
	Extremely challenging	3	6.4
Quality of student performance / work produced	Not very challenging at all	4	8.5
	Not very challenging	20	42.6
	Challenging	15	31.9
	Very challenging	4	8.5
	Extremely challenging	4	8.5

Table 3 Barriers to engaging in work placements

Barrier	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Capacity to mentor/supervise	1	5	2.67	1.289
Volume of risk and OSH paperwork	1	5	2.47	1.210
Identifying suitable projects	1	5	2.74	1.151
Willingness of staff	1	5	2.14	1.011
Willingness of management	1	5	2.14	1.154
Not approached by universities	1	5	2.89	1.359
Registered but not provided with a student	1	5	1.89	1.145
Concerns with student performance	1	5	2.39	1.133
Managing OSH / risk during placement	1	5	2.33	1.289
Advised we are unsuitable	1	5	1.82	1.214
Advised we are too small	1	5	2.18	1.485
Previous negative experiences	1	5	1.64	1.079