Where's WIL? Including work-integrated learning in descriptions of what it is that academics do

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Abstract

Australian universities are embracing work-integrated learning (WIL) and as a result, delivering WIL has become a key component of academic work. In light of its increasing popularity, it is surprising that WIL is often missing from accounts of what university lecturers do and tends to be valued less when compared to other academic activities such as research, face-to-face teaching, community engagement and governance. This article examines this oversight. A case is made for recognizing WIL as distinct from and of equal importance to other day-to-day academic tasks, and including WIL in common descriptions of academic work roles.

Keywords: Work-integrated learning, academic work roles.

Introduction

Work-integrated learning (WIL), also understood as work experience in industry, cooperative education, and field education, is now crucial to what happens in Australian universities. To a significant extent, this has been driven by legislative and policy changes that seek to improve the *work-readiness* of higher education graduates to meet industry and labor market demands (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008; Commonwealth of Australia, 2009a, 2009b; Patrick et al., 2009). Universities have been encouraged to implement WIL and have demonstrated an eagerness to do so; yet accounts of university educator's work roles have not kept pace and generally omit the delivery of WIL (Coaldrake & Stedman, 1999; Hall, 2002; Orrell, 2004). Proponents of quality WIL also observe that it tends to be less valued compared to other academic pursuits such as research, face-to-face teaching, community engagement, and governance and they argue that, as a consequence, WIL educators do not attract sufficient resources and support (Boud & Solomon, 2001; Cooper & Orrell, 1999; McCurdy & Zegwaard, 2009; Noble, 1999; Patrick et al., 2009). This article examines the absence of WIL in the literature that articulates what it is that academics do and argues for its inclusion.

Re-evaluating common descriptions of university educators' work in such a way that recognizes the significance of WIL is important for a number of reasons. WIL is the key strategy adopted by universities to produce the work-ready graduates demanded by employers. However, delivering WIL in ways that achieves this does not just happen; it takes dedicated resources and, in particular, knowledge, skill, time, and effort of university staff. It is with this in mind that the capacity of academics to provide quality WIL opportunities could be improved as a result of appreciating and valuing the work involved. There is also general agreement in the literature that WIL is under-resourced and Patrick et al. (2009) argued that finding ways to better resource and develop more enabling policies to encourage effective WIL should be priorities (Cooper, Orrell, & Bowden, 2010; Weisz & Smith, 2005). Moreover, including WIL in accounts of what university lecturers do may go a long way toward securing a fair share of organizational esteem and resources for WIL educators.

This article begins by describing the policy landscape and other drivers which have elevated WIL to being fundamental to the function of universities in Australia. In contrast, a report on the omission of WIL from descriptions of what it means to be a university lecturer is provided as are the ways in which WIL is mistakenly likened to teaching campus-based face-to-face units and generally mistreated as a less than significant addition to the day-to-day work of university educators. An argument for recognizing WIL as a distinct activity for academics of equal importance to research, face-to-face teaching, community service, and administration is made. While this article draws mainly on Australian experiences and material, WIL is well established worldwide and the arguments are relevant to other contexts (Coll & Eames, 2004). This article will be of interest to educators involved in delivering WIL as well as others responsible for managing universities and who appreciate and want to capitalize on the educational, economic, and institutional benefits of good WIL.

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The Advance of WIL in Universities

WIL has been an integral component of education within some disciplines in Australia for quite some time and recent legislative changes and policy shifts are expanding its presence and significance in universities. Patrick et al. (2009) suggest 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. The most common approach is workplace-based placements, and other strategies include industry engaged project work, work environment simulations and virtual activities. Field education was institutionally embedded in youth work, social work, education and nursing well before the current impetus on universities to deliver WIL (Bryson et al., 1986; Weber, 2000). Patrick et al. (2009) argued universities are under growing pressure from government, industry, professions, and the community to respond to skill shortages by producing a work-ready professionalized workforce with the requisite *employability skills* who can meet the needs of a rapidly changing economy (Cleary, Flynn,

Thomasson, Alexander, & McDonald, 2007; Precision Consultancy, 2007). The 2008 review of Australian higher education advocates for universities to do more in terms of preparing a highly productive workforce capable of meeting the needs of the labor market (Bradley et al., 2008; Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations, 2010). Moreover, the Rudd and Gillard Labor Government's *Education Revolution* continues a trend visible in the *Higher Education Support Act 2003* as well as the Howard Liberal Government's *Skills for the Future* policy interested in enhancing the role of universities in generating graduates who are work-ready (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009a; Hansard, 2006; O'Connor, 2008). Marginson (2002) identified the expectation that Australian universities provide the growing number of professionals needed for nation building and the workforce is not new and *investment in human capital* was a major reason for government investment in the higher education sector from the mid-1950s to the late 1980s. What is new is the increasing role and influence of industry in shaping the policy agenda and that WIL is a key strategy governments, industries, and universities are now embracing to realize it.

Given this interest in and demand for WIL, it comes as little surprise to find WIL is now mainstream in Australian universities (McLennan, 2008). For example, WIL is often a priority in institutional strategic directions and regularly features in university marketing strategies (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2008). Many universities are also obliging all discipline areas to implement WIL. Charles Sturt University (2007), Flinders University (2008), Griffith University (2006), and RMIT University (2008) are cases in point, embracing these developments with the introduction of policies requiring WIL activities be embedded in programs and courses. The Australian Government is also directing how WIL is to be done within universities. Since 2005, universities have had to actively provide direction to students' learning and performance when engaged in WIL to be eligible for associated funding (Bates, 2008). The *Higher Education Support Act 2003* and accompanying administration guidelines, which were most recently updated in 2009, specify the requirements (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). The criteria relate to the level of oversight, direction and management that universities need to provide and include improving and formalizing the support given to students on placement as well as the educational content, standards of performance to be achieved, and assessment of student learning within such units (Atkinson, Rizzetti, & Smith, 2005). Patrick et al. (2008) argued the policy changes are forcing Australian universities to comply and deliver practicum courses that are consistent with the criteria to receive direct public funding. At the same time, WIL has been mainstreamed within Australian universities: Have descriptions of what is means to be a university lecturer kept pace?

WIL is Missing from Common Descriptions of Academic Work

Popular accounts of what university lecturers do generally omit WIL and there are numerous explanations for this oversight. According to Hall (2002), academics do teaching, research, service or community engagement, and administration or governance. Others who have written about the day-to-day work of lecturers suggest a similar list of activities

(Bowden & Marton, 2004; Larkins, 2008; McInnis, 1999; Visser-Wijnveen, Driel, Van der Rijst, Verloop, & Visser, 2010). All too often WIL fails to rate a mention. One reason for the omission could be the fairly recent mainstreaming of WIL and Universities Australia (2007) acknowledges WIL has not traditionally been university 'core business'. Common descriptions of the academic role found in the literature have subsequently not kept pace. However, Boud and Solomon (2001) identified what many areas of university-based professional education can demonstrate that WIL in higher education is not new. Other reasons that WIL is not included in accounts of academic work roles deserve attention.

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Another explanation for the exclusion of WIL from descriptions of what university lecturers do is that the official functions of WIL are typically at odds with what many argue the purposes of universities should be. The expansion of WIL is being driven by higher education policy that is specifically shaped by economic imperatives and, in particular, the interests of business and industry. Moreover, employers expect universities to produce graduates who are *fully employable* and university executives are embracing WIL to achieve *work-readiness*, *skills* and *productivity* agendas (McIlveen et al., 2008). The way in which universities have taken up these agendas and employed WIL to achieve them has attracted criticism in so much as it limits the role of WIL to vocational preparation and skills development, reducing higher education to "advanced vocational training," and positioning universities as a'"job placement agency" (Billet, 2009; Hall, 2002, p. 25). In other words, a focus on such utilitarian interests and vocational outcomes is viewed as contrary to university's traditional mission of the creation and advancement of knowledge, as well as its dissemination for the common good (Harman & Treadgold, 2007; Marginson, 2007). Further, and following Larkins (2008), WIL within the contemporary Australian higher education system is officially designed to *develop human capital* and produce employable and productive workers rather than critically engaged citizens capable of deep intellectual thought and who have a commitment to the pursuit of knowledge to advance the broader collective good (Johnston, 2007; Weisz & Kimber, 2001). An education led by labor market requirements and business demands, and which focuses on the acquisition of specific technical skills, is also far different from the more emancipatory, humanistic, moral, and civic processes and outcomes many suggest should characterize what a university education is all about (Grubb & Lazerson, 2004; Nussbaum, 1997, 2010). These discrepancies could be reasons for the omission of WIL in academic role descriptions.

On a similar note, WIL can be seen to undermine what many perceive to be legitimate academic work. Drawing on Foucault, Hall (2002) argued "the impulse to question, reinterrogate, unsettle, and dissipate familiarities should drive our work as intellectuals" (p. xviii). Similarly, Chomsky suggests intellectuals enjoy a unique privilege and responsibility to "speak the truth and expose lies" (Chomsky & Peck, 1987, p. 60; Said, 1996). While such activities are not inimical to delivering WIL, the official functions and practices of WIL are not framed within a discourse interested in critical reflective practice or intellectually

driven scholarly and public pursuits. Marginson (2002) also identified a *crisis of academic identity*, evident by a "destructive stand-off between academic cultures and the culture of corporate management," (p. 420) that has been brought on by the corporatization of internal university systems and cultures. Marginson fails to mention knowledge, a point not missed by Boud and Solomon (2001) who argued that WIL reduces the status of universities as the primary producers of knowledge and disrupts their monopoly over knowledge production because of its reliance on, and close relationships with, the world outside higher education institutions, in particular industry and employers. WIL is officially aligned with corporate interests within and beyond higher education institutions which treat knowledge as a commodity that needs to have a commercial benefit to be of worth. Drawing on Coaldrake and Steadman (1999), WIL also confronts issues of academic territory and independence because it requires negotiation over issues of ownership and design of curriculum, matters traditionally exclusively determined by academics. The marginalization of WIL in what it means to be an academic could be one way the tension between management and academic imperatives has been manifested.

The esteemed status of research and publishing in universities provides a further explanation for the marginalization of WIL. Spencer and McDonald (1998) claimed that field education is disadvantaged within the research-oriented culture of universities; a point echoed by Lager (2004) and reiterated over a decade later by Cooper, Orrell, and Bowden (2010). Similarly Clarke (2006), McGrail, Rickard, and Jones (2006), McInnis (1999) and Hall (2002) argued research and publishing are the privileged and *value-determining* component of academics' professional lives, attracting a disproportionate amount of academic charisma, prestige, income and career opportunities for universities and lecturers compared to other pursuits, and this includes WIL. This puts into a context the observation made by Cooper and Orrell (1999) that WIL staff sacrifice their academic careers in order to deliver WIL. Marginson (2007) also identified that it is research performance that drives many of the university global ranking schemes, and WIL generally fails to be included as a criterion in data-gathering processes. Actually, staff that specialize in WIL often do not have the time or capacity to generate research income or publications and this can inadvertently diminish the reputation of universities in league tables that cover only a small fraction of university activities. In other words, research and publishing are positioned as academic core business and, as a result, WIL is sidelined and not recognized as academic work.

Another reason why WIL is not recognized as a core academic activity could be the intensification of academics' workloads that has taken place over the same period that successive Australian governments have been inadequately funding universities. In other words, the workloads of academics are already complex, diverse and full without the inclusion of WIL, and this is not helped by universities being cash strapped and lecturers having to do more with less. Recent workforce audits have revealed considerable increases in work for academics. For example, Universities Australia reported staff-to-student ratios have *blown out*

from 14 to 1 in the early 1990s to be sitting at around 20 students for every teacher in 2006 (Larkins, 2008). Universities Australia also identified the diversity of university lecturers' everyday work, of which higher teaching loads are but one component. They argue there are increasing expectations on academics to generate innovative research, secure external research funding, publish, and supervise post graduate students as well as perform other activities such as teaching, community service and university governance. This has taken place in the context of a decline in full-time tenured lecturer positions and the deteriorating state of public funding for higher education in Australia (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2005). Such developments have also occurred in the context of the expanding delivery of WIL. In the absence of sufficient funding for universities, WIL has been marginalized.

A different way of understanding the absence of WIL from accounts of academic work roles is the assumption that it is similar to delivering conventional campus-based face-to-face courses or units and that teaching adequately encompasses WIL. For example Devlin and Samarawickrema (2010), Hall (2002) and Marginson (2002, 2007) appeared to collapse WIL into being just another method of teaching. The Australian government's recent higher education policy initiatives also fail to specifically name WIL, although there are numerous references to improving and expanding innovative teaching and learning as well as student's learning experiences and it can only be assumed these statements are meant to capture WIL (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009a, 2009b). However, proponents of quality WIL argued it is a significantly different method of education requiring particular institutional structures as well as distinct knowledge, skills, time, and effort from academics (Bennett, 2008; Cooper, Orrell, & Bowden, 2010; Patrick et al., 2009). As reported in the literature, there are multiple and diverse relational, curriculum, pedagogical, legal, ethical and administrative challenges and obligations entailed in the delivery of WIL courses (Billet, 2009; Britzman, 2003; Coll & Eames, 2004; Johnston, 2007; Orrell, 2004). Boud, Solomon, and Symes (2001) added that WIL educators need to consider learner and setting together, unlike other forms of educational provision that try to disengage learners from the settings in which they operate. Spencer and McDonald (1998) also identified that the delivery of field education stands outside the traditional tertiary mode in both teaching and administration. This includes the need to negotiate and sustain dynamic on-the-ground and ever-changing partnerships between various stakeholders: Universities, employers, professional associations, and students. The *Higher Education Support Act 2003* and accompanying administration guidelines also acknowledged university managed WIL as a discrete practice that not only requires academics to do a series of tasks specific to the delivery of student placements, but also a distinct funding formula that differs from how other units of study are to be financially supported. Such observations and practical measures indicate WIL is not the same as teaching on-campus units and therefore should be included as a separate activity in descriptions that characterize the work of academics.

WIL Deserves to be Included in Descriptions
of What it Means to Be An Academic

There are good reasons to recognize the distinctiveness and merits of WIL. For example, WIL has educational and scholarly worth. Coll and Eames (2004) and Patrick et al. (2009) argued WIL is a valid pedagogy and legitimate educational strategy. Atkinson et al. (2005) and Boud and Solomon (2001) identified the learning outcomes attributed to WIL are broader than those generally found in classroom-based courses. Well structured, WIL can also provide the valuable educational experience required for developing expert intellectual and practical capabilities typically required of effective and ethical professionals, such as the ability to make rational, ethical, and complex judgments in unpredictable and *unknown situations* (Billet, 2009; Bowden & Marton, 2004; Johnston, 2007; Tynjala, Valimaa, & Sarja, 2003). WIL also exposes students to significant direct consequences for their immediate decisions and actions, whereas the implications of what happens in the classroom can be less critical (Bates, 2008). As a result, it is through WIL that practice and its effects can be appreciated, examined, and explored in ways not available to units delivered solely on-campus (Lager, 2004). Moreover, WIL can complement and enrich university-based professional education and enhance the quality of all university learning.

WIL is also being drawn upon to assist Australian universities in what Marginson (2002) described as their "position and strategy in a global context" (p. 414). WIL relies on industry and employers who are able to offer opportunities for workplace-based placements. Australia's strong economic performance, including during the recent global financial crisis, puts it in a better position than other countries of delivering a steady supply of work placements. This puts the country's higher education system in a good position to further capitalize on marketing innovative, well-supported, and quality WIL as a distinctive attribute (Cooper, Orrell, & Bowden, 2010). Marginson (2002) argued Australian universities need to seek competitive commercial advantage in the global education market and that the best way of achieving this is by producing a product that is unique. Improving the recognition of WIL could contribute toward expanding it as an attractive specialization of the Australian higher education system and help universities profit from the institutional and commercial benefits of effective WIL.

WIL is also able to make a unique economic, social, and cultural contribution to Australia. The Australian government is, once again, interested in using universities as a principal tool for a modern day nation building exercise, particularly in relation to achieving a knowledge-based economy, developing human capital and improving social inclusion (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009a, 2009b). WIL is a technique that can be drawn on to make a significant contribution to reforging and restrengthening this renewed partnership and synergy between nation and university (Marginson, 2002). WIL can also assist the higher education sector with improving the access, participation and outcomes for students, which is a key objective of the Federal government's higher education policy reforms (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2010). Birrell, Healy, and Smith (2008) also claimed that it is university educated graduates, with specialist knowledge and professional

capacities, that are needed to address apparent skill shortages within the Australian labor market. If this is accurate, then among the various academic pursuits WIL is in a unique position to be able to deliver on this.

Formalizing WIL in academic position descriptions may also encourage much needed research activity in this area. It is reasonable to assume that if WIL is invisible in accounts of what university lecturers do then the need for research is also unlikely to be recognized. Cooper et al. (2010) argued WIL has become a vital higher education enterprise; however, it has been, for the most part, under-researched and under-theorized. Research could go a long way toward capturing, understanding, evaluating, and improving the diverse purposes and practices of WIL as well as enhancing potential benefits for the range of stakeholders involved. Cooper et al. (2010) identified a burgeoning WIL scholarly community that has an interest in doing just that and which could be bolstered by the recognition of WIL as a key component of academic work.

WIL offers unique opportunities for universities, students, governments and employers and it appears it is here to stay as a distinctive feature of Australian higher education and an integral component of academic work.

Drawing on Boud and Solomon (2001), WIL represents conceptual shifts in contemporary higher education practices and academic identities. Tynjala et al. (2003) identified that WIL embodies critical changes in university-society relationships that are re-designing academic work and creating new dynamics in knowledge production and in university pedagogy and educational practices. Following Boud and Solomon, academics engaged in WIL take on different subject positions compared to other academics because they are subjected to distinct forms of regulation in the university and in workplaces, and the special expertise and pedagogical approaches they need to draw on shape their identity in ways that differ to traditional disciplinary-based knowledge and practice (Billet, 2009; Britzman, 2003; Coll & Eames, 2004). In light of WIL being integral to the function of the Australian higher education system and a core activity forging new identities for many academics, it ought to be included in descriptions of what it is that lecturers do and valued as equally important to other day-to-day academic tasks.

Conclusion

WIL offers unique opportunities for universities, students, governments and employers and it appears it is here to stay as a distinctive feature of Australian higher education and an integral component of academic work. However, at the same time that the benefits of WIL are appreciated, WIL is typically missing from common accounts of lecturers' work. This article has identified that WIL is often sidelined within a hierarchy of academic activities and can be mistakenly conceptualized as akin to teaching on campus units.

Drawing on Spencer and McDonald (1998), there appears to be a dissonance between WIL being fundamental to a university education and a lack of recognition extended to it. This article argues that it is time for a creative reassessment of academic work roles and expecta-

tions in ways that recognize the distinctiveness and value of WIL. Including WIL within descriptions of what it is that academics do in ways that are comparable to research, on-campus teaching, community engagement, and university administration is long overdue and reasons for doing so were observed.

This paper does not specifically address the questions of whether and how academic staff should be involved with WIL. There is also a need for further research on whether the inclusion of WIL in descriptions of academic work roles would result in increased resources and organizational esteem for WIL as well as improved learning experiences and outcomes for students. The assertion that WIL results in work-ready graduates also deserves scrutiny.

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