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Delivering equity through compulsory work placement

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Editorial

It is a pleasure to present the full papers of the Australian Collaborative Education Network (ACEN) conference *Beyond 2022: Creating the future with Work Integrated Learning (WIL)*. The 2-day face-to-face event attracted 290 researchers and practitioners from Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. The keynote presentations, 66 showcases, 11 roundtables, 12 refereed papers and poster presentations were well received and showcased innovative growth, enthusiasm, and scholarly practice in WIL.

The full papers presented in these proceedings add to the growing evidence base in scholarship and research for current WIL practice and should inspire emerging and future researchers across a diversity of practice and learning contexts to join the growing international and national WIL communities.

The full papers articulate the “Beyond 2022: Creating the future with WIL” conference theme, voiced through the following sub-themes:

- Enhancing employability through WIL
- Innovative, scalable, and sustainable WIL
- Delivering quality WIL
- WIL leadership: shaping the future
- Collaborative stakeholder engagement
- Indigenous engagement: Building capacity through WIL
- Diversity in WIL – Inclusive WIL Practices
- Service Learning and Community Engagement

We would like to acknowledge RMIT and Deakin Universities as the co-hosts of the conference and thank the dedication and commitment of the Conference Committee in contributing their time and expertise to produce the conference program. A special thank you to the reviewers who ensured professional integrity through the blind review process and our sincere thanks to Liz Shoostovian for undertaking the final edit of the full papers and for compiling the proceedings.

We hope these proceedings will add to current WIL research to help highlight the importance of WIL across all educational platforms.

Leoni Russell

ACEN 2022 National Conference Chair

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Reflecting on experience of investigating the accessibility of work-integrated learning using a participatory research methodology	
<i>Timothy Boye – University of Technology Sydney</i>	6
Delivery equity through compulsory work placement	
<i>Liz Bracken – Charles Sturt University</i>	
<i>Narelle Patton – Charles Sturt University</i>	
<i>Euan Lindsay – Aalborg University</i>	12
A framework to assure the institutional quality of WIL	
<i>Matthew Campbell – University of Sydney</i>	
<i>Leoni Russell – RMIT University</i>	
<i>Lorraine Smith – University of Sydney</i>	
<i>Lindy McAllister – University of Sydney</i>	
<i>Ricky Tunny – Queensland University of Technology</i>	
<i>Kate Thomson – University of Sydney</i>	
<i>Maria Barrett – Queensland University Technology</i>	19
An institutional framework for mapping WIL: An exemplar from practice	
<i>Bonnie Dean – University of Wollongong</i>	
<i>Michelle J. Eady – University of Wollongong</i>	
<i>Tracey Moroney – University Wollongong</i>	
<i>Conor West – University of Wollongong</i>	
<i>Tracey Glover-Chambers – University of Wollongong</i>	
<i>Venkata Yanamandram – University of Wollongong</i>	
<i>Nuala O'Donnell – University of Wollongong</i>	27
Internship crafting: Transposing the concept of job crafting for students undertaking WIL	
<i>Julian Lee – RMIT University</i>	
<i>Anna Branford – RMIT University</i>	35
Quality and benefits of engineering and industry placements: Insights from students and graduates	
<i>Melissa Marinelli – University of Melbourne</i>	
<i>Martina Calais – Murdoch University</i>	
<i>Sonia J. Ferns – Learnwork Consulting</i>	
<i>Susan Kreemer Pickford – Engineers Australia</i>	
<i>Sally Male – University of Melbourne</i>	39
The impact of structured Interprofessional Education (IPE) clinical placements on student interprofessional collaborative behavior	
<i>Sonya Mattiazzi – University of Queensland</i>	47

TABLE OF CONTENTS cont.

Collaborating with students and industry as partners to co-design embedded-WIL education resources <i>Robert McHenry – Deakin University</i> <i>Siva Krishnan – Deakin University</i>	55
The National Tax Clinic Program: Creating new opportunities with Work Integrated Learning and improving the self-efficacy of Accounting, Business and Law Students <i>John McLaren – CQ University</i> <i>Michelle Cull – Western Sydney University</i> <i>Brett Freudenberg – Griffith University</i>	61
Moving from professional learning to a professional learning community: Teacher education tertiary supervisors and the third space <i>Clare Power – Charles Sturt University</i> <i>Matthew Winslade – Charles Sturt University</i>	65
In pursuit of WIL: Factors affecting the expansion of WIL <i>Jennifer Ruskin – Macquarie University</i> <i>Anne-Marie Fannon – University of Waterloo</i> <i>Amie Durston – University of Waterloo</i> <i>Sridevi Kundurthi – University of Waterloo</i>	70
WIL leadership: Preparing students for a post-Banking Royal Commission world <i>Rosemary Sainty – University of Technology Sydney</i> <i>Franziska Trede – University of Technology Sydney</i> <i>Carmel Foley – University of Technology Sydney</i>	75
Service-Learning with ‘soul’: A meaningful approach to work-integrated learning <i>Gianni Zappalà – University of Technology Sydney</i> <i>Gautam Pingali – University of Technology Sydney</i>	90

Delivering equity through compulsory work placement

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The authentic in-situ experiences workplace learning (WPL) delivers is considered invaluable for developing graduate employability. The barrier to providing WPL experiences for all students (i.e., universal WPL) is the high cost of placements. Additional financial and strategic resourcing and administrative challenges involved in WPL implementation can leave WPL managerially unsupported in business degrees which do not have accreditation requirements mandating compulsory WPL experiences. Without mandated WPL, business schools typically have weak appetites for overcoming barriers such as difficulties securing enough quality placements. As business schools' long-term sustainability is increasingly challenged by external competitors such as shorter and less expensive modules and courses, WPL can provide added value and protection against these threats. Resolving industry demands and tensions around developing work-ready graduates is contingent on complementing theory with practical application through WPL in development of a sustainable work-ready graduate pipeline built on strong industry-university collaborations.

Keywords: workplace learning (WPL), employability, student equity, industry collaboration

Introduction

Globally industry expectations and pressure for better prepared 'work-ready graduates' are a strong and growing driver in university employability agendas (Doherty & Stephens, 2020; Effeney, 2020; McManus & Rook, 2021). Job readiness leans on graduate employability acquired through an accurate understanding of profession and a strong, developed set of industry appropriate employability skills most effectively developed in students through the pedagogical strategy known as work-integrated learning (WIL) (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017).

WIL is often defined as "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). Although WIL is described as a "deliberate pedagogy" (Effeney, 2020, p. 389), the verb 'practice' in WIL is quite broadly applied to student activities from completely classroom based, one-way low engagement case studies or guest lectures, through to extended periods of fully immersed, two-way, high-engagement placement performing authentic work under an industry professional's supervision (Jackson, 2015; Wolf, 2010). Sitting between low and high engagement on the spectrum are a variety of activities, which include site visits, job shadowing, virtual projects, developing learning resources, simulations, and volunteering (Dollinger & Brown, 2019; Jackson, 2015; Universities Australia, 2019) along with more recent innovative approaches such as hackathons, micro-placements and incubators (Kay et al., 2019). Using an 'umbrella term' WIL to describe such variation has been noted as problematic (Dollinger & Brown, 2019; Oliver, 2015) with the confusion further compounded by the diverse range of WIL strategies.

Any form of WIL can be useful to boost graduate employability skills and increase work-readiness, however, the high engagement of WIL placement is recognized as preferable over less engaged forms of WIL (Aprile & Knight, 2020; Dean et al., 2020; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017).

Work-integrated learning (WIL) placement

WIL placement is a pedagogy with strong foundations in education theories such as Dewey's socially constructed learning (1938), Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984) and Lave and Wenger's community of practice theory (1991). WIL placement essentially anchors student learning to doing, by taking the student out of the classroom and connecting theory to the practical realm of real, in-situ workplaces where students experience and partake in authentic work. Although WIL placement is a good descriptor for this kind of in-situ learning, it is not a universally accepted term. Instead WIL placement is known by an extensive range of interchangeable terms including (but not restricted to) internships, practicums, professional practice, workplace learning, industry-based learning, placement, project-based learning, cooperative education, fieldwork education, service learning, real world learning, university engaged learning, practice-based education, experiential learning, clinical placements, work experience, clinical practice, and work-based learning (Dollinger & Brown, 2019; Edwards et al., 2015; Oliver, 2015).

For clarity and precision, WIL placement will hereafter be referred to as workplace learning (WPL), based on the definition of "supervised, purposeful, situated, contextual, collaborative learning that occurs in real world professional settings" (Charles Sturt University, 2019, p. 1), meeting the following specific conditions:

1. students' active participation and purposeful engagement with professional roles and responsibilities in real-world professional environments;
2. supported by sound learning and teaching strategies and appropriate supervision; and
3. counts towards academic credit as part of a compulsory component of the course (Charles Sturt University, 2019).

Graduate employability has stronger links to WPL

WPL not only yields the stakeholder benefits of non-placement WIL, but in terms of work-readiness, placement and employability WPL delivers additional supplementary benefits to industry, government, and universities (Artess et al., 2017; Brooks & Youngson, 2016; Wilton, 2012). Industry wants work-ready graduates for reasons including altruistic and corporate responsibility motives, however operational and cost benefits addressing skill shortages and reducing training requirements for faster job engagement and productivity rank highly (Jackson, 2015; McManus & Rook, 2021).

Graduate employability outcomes are equally highly sought after by government who recognize these impacts flow to national productivity, leading to stronger economic and competitive positions, all highly desirable in current global uncertainty (Artess et al., 2017; Jackson, 2015; Kay et al., 2019). For universities and students, research shows high-impact programs like WPL generate significant increases in business schools' undergraduate enrolment, progression and graduation rates alongside fostering industry relationships for better curriculum design and research collaborations (Govender & Taylor, 2015; Jackson, 2015; Sendall et al., 2016).

Prior to graduation, WPL provides students with academic benefits by connecting abstract theory to practical hands-on experiences which strengthens academic learning and understanding (Brooks & Youngson, 2016; Jackson, 2015; Sendall et al., 2016). Increases in students' employability skills development and social capital acquisition facilitates more senior, higher-paid employment at faster rates than their non-placement WIL peers (Allen et al., 2013; Brooks & Youngson, 2016; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021). All of this combines to make WPL a very attractive value-add and marketing proposition for universities.

Furthermore, WPL has a unique ability to compensate for various pre-existing student disadvantages. Compelling arguments from disciplines outside business schools illustrate disenfranchised cohorts benefit from placement to a much larger extent than their higher-grade point average (GPA) and socioeconomic status (SES) peers (DeClou et al., 2013; Nunley et al., 2016; Reddy & Moores, 2012). The historical favoritism of high-GPA and -SES students for placement discriminates against marginalized 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).

Despite universal WPL's ability to create equity, particularly through social capital and employability skill development (Batistic & Tymon, 2017; Silva et al., 2018), it has not become standard practice in business schools. Rather, if business schools have any kind placement program, they are generally ad-hoc and extracurricular, offered in a limited capacity (Universities Australia, 2019). Without compulsory universal WPL programs, disadvantaged students typically miss out on limited WPL opportunities due to the selective processes which discourage and/or disqualify their applications.

Barriers to University WPL

Embedding universal WPL in business schools has some complex inhibitors including placement shortages and high placement costs to both universities and students, creating weak program appetite from both industry and universities, further compounded by the absence of industry accreditation.

Industry unwillingness to participate in WPL programs severely affects universities' ability to source and deliver sufficient placements for all students (Cameron, 2017; Effeney, 2020; Frew & Smith, 2019; Jackson, 2018). The reluctance of industry to support placements has several underlying causes including not understanding the process well, not knowing how to get involved, legal risks (Cameron, 2017), lost production (Govender & Taylor, 2015), inflexible university study sessions, lack of university resources, unnecessarily bureaucratic processes (Doherty & Stephens, 2020), lack of resources or time to manage a placement, and/or an adversity to negotiating placement terms (Australian Workforce Productivity Agency, 2014; Cameron, 2017; Govender & Taylor, 2015; Jackson et al., 2017). Given the pivotal role as supervisors and hosts, industry collaboration is central and key to offering and sustaining university WPL programs.

With a scarcity of placements, business schools resort to one of two common placement models. Competitive placement systems typically streamline the allocation of the limited opportunities by imposing a high GPA eligibility requirement.

Self-selection placement programs leave students to leverage their social capital and networks for placements. Ultimately, although likely non-intentionally, current non-universal placement practices favor wealthy, privileged and/or academic high achievers producing wide inequities for low SES and lower GPA students who would greatly benefit more from WPL opportunities (Brooks & Youngson, 2016; Klein & Weiss, 2011; Tomlinson, 2012).

Business schools easily maintain their non-universal WPL position based on the difficulties sourcing enough placements but there is also an interplay of associated costs underpinning the decision. For universities, the delivery of WPL programs are time-consuming, expensive, and resource intensive (Winchester-Seeto, 2019), previously estimated to cost 15-21% more than alternative teaching practices (Australian Department of Education, 2011). Universal WPL programs have many implicit and explicit costs beyond general administration including legislative compliance, canvassing

placements, monitoring of placement, mentoring, placement supervision and assessment challenges (Cameron, 2017; Jackson et al., 2017; Shooshtari & Manuel, 2014).

The non-universal WPL approach largely goes unchallenged in business disciplines given the lack of accreditation mandates which enforce the adoption of WPL in other disciplines.

The role of Accreditation

Globally the lack of universal WPL in business schools is underpinned by a combination of non-compulsory professional accreditation requirements reinforced by poor institutional support and motivation to embed WPL into course curricula (Baker et al., 2017; Darley & Luethge, 2019; Govender & Taylor, 2015; Hogan et al., 2021; McIntyre & Gilbert, 2021; Sánchez-Bayón et al., 2020; Sziegat, 2021). Internationally, business schools are disconnected from the compulsory accreditation approach of universal WPL in other disciplines such as medicine, education and health, which recognize the importance of the role WPL plays in stronger graduate employability outcomes. Within these disciplines, professional accreditation is the gatekeeper to graduates' entering the profession, and WPL is seen as an essential part of ensuring graduates are equipped with the skills required for practice. Business schools, however, are not subject to industry regulation through accreditation and have upheld resistance to industry's calls for universal WPL to be included in university course curricula (Brooks & Youngson, 2016; Dearing, 1997; Sendall et al., 2016). The weak regard for the practical experience gained through WPL has led business schools to favor non-placement WIL approaches such as simulation, case studies, site visits and projects, resulting in criticism from industry for a narrow teaching foci with limited employability skills prioritization and engagement with industry (Seethamraju, 2012).

However, expanding competition from non-university business schools is an increasing threat to future sustainability of business schools, and therefore, an aggravation not easily ignored. WPL can offer genuine opportunities to value add and protect business schools' existing market positions from further erosion.

Business schools are facing increasing challenges

Remaining relevant and combatting online market disruption is a dilemma and a deep source of concern for contemporary business schools, as education becomes increasingly globalized, digitized and massified (Bandera et al., 2019; Dollinger & Brown, 2019). The landscape is changing with unprecedented market disruption from the escalation of aggressive online competitors offering targeted business certificate programs such as micro-masters, badges, certificates of completion, nano-degrees and MOOC-based certificates which can be completed faster and at a lower cost than degree programs (Kaplan, 2018; Sinha, 2019). Market entry for these competitors has been made possible by the low accreditation and cost barriers to entry for this style of education, and as an alternative to a business degree, these short, less costly credential offerings by non-institutional providers are a significant and growing threat for universities (Baker et al., 2017; Taylor, 2019).

Refusal or reluctance to embrace universal WPL carries significant risks for universities that the non-institutional, externally based business schools will recognize the potential to use WPL as a critical point of difference to attract students (Baker et al., 2017). Universal WPL programs may offer a sustainable approach boosting the relevance of business schools to help overcome such external threats (Govender & Taylor, 2015).

Sustainable solutions depend on strong industry-university collaborations

In the current economic climate, encouraging stronger WPL investment through the adoption of universal WPL by business schools will be a tough sell. However, despite the reluctance, universal WPL can deliver the work-readiness industry and government demands through WPL's ability to develop employability skills and improve graduate employability. The sustainability of business schools' futures has a solution in universal WPL, but the ability to provide placement opportunities is very much contingent on developing partnerships with industry (McManus & Rook, 2021). Universal WPL offers strong mutually beneficial relationships for industry and universities. It is not just a sustainable university-industry development goal but a necessary collaboration and step towards business schools' future relevance and viability.

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