What Makes Staff (and Universities) Ready, WIL-ing and Able?

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Abstract

University Work Integrated Learning (WIL) initiatives, need to provide sustainable, high quality programs that meet the needs of teachers, students and industry partners. To do so, staff require both appropriate skill sets, and optimal enabling and organizational structures. A total of 34 academics participated in the study. The first aim was to determine whether there are differences in the competencies between academics who co-ordinate work placements programs and those who conduct less than 10% of WIL in the classroom. The competency analysis revealed that skill and behavioural requirements of work placement co-ordinators differ from those of the traditional/general academic. This finding may have implications for recruitment and career structure of work placement co-ordinators and WIL practitioners. We then determined the needs are of academics who engage in WIL activities. Academics who engage with more than 20% of WIL activity in the classroom (including work placement co-ordinators) participated in a semi-structured interview. The analyses revealed three categories as critical for WIL sustainability which were: recognition, resources, and stakeholder engagement. While the perception of WIL practices is generally a positive one, areas of improvement to assist staff to perform WIL approaches optimally are highlighted.

Keywords: Work placement co-ordinators; Work integrated Learning; Competency

Introduction

Universities need to incorporate greater opportunities for students to integrate their classroom-learned knowledge with the future work skills. One way this can be achieved is through Work Integrated Learning (WIL). WIL is often described as the interplay between formal learning and workplace experiences and commonly includes activities such as work placements, internships, and classroom based activities such as experiential learning activities, case studies and industry speakers. If coordinated effectively, WIL holds enormous potential for producing work-ready graduates. Increased competition among universities ensures that it is important that WIL programs are effectively planned and coordinated and many universities are beginning to do so (McLennan & Keating, 2008). Appropriately qualified and experienced academics are needed to conduct WIL. They need to be able to cope with challenges, such as sourcing appropriate WIL opportunities, supervising and supporting students, managing high workloads with limited resources, communicating with a range of individuals, integrating coursework with workplace learning, and managing the often varied expectations of diverse stakeholders (Brown, 2010).

Previous researchers have postulated that there may be several distinct skills required by academics who engage with WIL (including academics who are work placement co-ordinators) but no study has empirically determined this. Cooper and Orrell (1999) suggested that WIL teachers require high level organisational skills, knowledge of industrial policies, legal and ethical standards, knowledge of conditions for optimal experiential learning, knowledge of work practices and of a specific discipline, strong interpersonal communication and conflict resolution skills, credibility outside the university and advanced communication and negotiation skills. Also, WIL teachers required knowledge and skills related to management, ethics as well as entrepreneurialism. Teachers of WIL, may also require change management skills and leadership capabilities (Jones, Ladyshewsky, Oliver & Flavell, 2008). WIL staff with entrepreneurial ability may create positive outcomes for the university and industry through their skills in creating and maintaining strong relationships with industry representatives (Cooper & Orrell, 1999). Entrepreneurial skills such as identifying and leveraging opportunity, seem necessary therefore for effective performance in a WIL role. As such, WIL staff should be supported in developing entrepreneurial skills to assist in the provision of successful WIL programs. While these ideas and differences are theoretically proposed, there has been no empirical evidence offered that this is the case.
The aim of this research was to explore whether there were any substantive differences in skills and abilities between academics who co-ordinate/supervise work placements and general academics who practise less than 10% of WIL. It was hypothesised that the competencies required for work placement co-ordination would differ to general academics who engage with less than 10% of WIL in the classroom. A further aim was to determine the specific needs of academics who practice WIL.

**Methodology**

**Participants**

We studied 34 participants from Deakin University. Two groups were studied. The first group, the ‘WIL group’ (total n=26) comprised two sub-groups: lecturers who conduct a high proportion of WIL in the classroom and lecturers who supervise/co-ordinate work placements. A further 8 lecturers whose curriculum includes less than 10 per cent of WIL constituted the ‘control group’. The Faculties of Health, Business and Law, Arts and Education, and Science and Technology were represented from both undergraduate and post graduate teaching groups.

**Materials**

The Saville Consulting Wave Performance Culture Framework (Saville Consulting, 2008) was used to determine the desired competencies of the WIL placement coordinators. This framework is made up of a series of cards organised under three broad segments: Global, Ability and Behaviour. Each segment is organised hierarchically, starting with the components that make up the higher level clusters and then breaking down into sections, dimensions and finally facets at the most detailed level (see Figure 1 for Behavioural Segment). The competency analysis utilises a set of selected cards (on the basis of relevance) to determine the competencies required to effectively perform in the role of placement coordinator, as well as highlight areas of potential development. For the purposes of this study, the clusters, sections, dimensions and facets relating to the overarching headings of Global and Behaviour were utilised exclusively as the descriptors of behaviour and effectiveness within these segments were considered most relevant to WIL personnel. Each card contains several descriptors of behaviour and the participant is asked “which of these descriptors are most important to the job you do?” The researcher systematically exposes the participant to a number of cards and drills down to the most important behaviours that they perceive they need, in order to conduct their work.

![Figure 1: Structure of the Behavioural Segment from Saville Consulting Wave Performance Culture Framework.](image)

A semi-structured interview (26 items) explored barriers and facilitators to WIL, at both an organisational and supervisory level. Demographic information was also collected. A sample item included: what organisational structures best develop and reinforce these competencies such that quality of a WIL program is sustained?

**Procedure**

Participants were recruited via email and included the plain language statement and consent forms. Interviews were approximately 30 minutes duration, and were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were qualitatively analysed using NVivo 9 to identify central categories and themes. Those interviewees who were placement
coordinators were also invited to participate in a competency analysis to inform the competency profile/framework. A second sample of academics involved in less than 10% of WIL, participated in the competency analysis and as mentioned was the control group.

Results

Competency Analysis Findings

The competency analysis for the placement coordinators and the control group is presented at the dimensional level, see figure 2. Whilst many behaviour dimensions were examined, the dimension level results from the overarching clusters of ‘Influencing People’ and ‘Delivering Results’ will be presented, as these clusters displayed more variation than other clusters.

![Figure 2: Dimension level comparison between the placement co-ordinators and the control group from ‘Influencing People’](image)

Variation between both groups and between dimensions is evident. The greatest difference between the groups relates to the dimension of ‘Interacting with People’. Placement-co-ordinators spend much of their time proactively developing and maintaining relationships with agencies/organisations. This skill may be considered part of the entrepreneurial orientation. The dimension of ‘Convincing People’ also shows variation between groups. These differences reflect variation that one might intuitively expect.
The facet of ‘Seizing Opportunities’ shows the largest difference between groups. Along with the behaviours of interacting with people and convincing others, it contributes to the entrepreneurial nature of placement co-ordinators. The variable of ‘Following Procedures’ also suggests a difference between groups. This is likely to relate to the need to encourage students and industry representatives to adhere to strict guidelines and procedures which would be desirable.

The Needs Analysis

The content analysis of the interview data revealed three categories, being: Recognition, Resources and Stakeholder Management and Support. Each of the categories is discussed below with verbatim quotes in italics.

1. Recognition

Participants perceived a lack of recognition among other academic staff not involved in WIL. Participants believed WIL does not fit the normal academic model. In addition, they felt a lack of clarity and awareness as to what WIL encompasses and to its priority.

‘Most of the people around here are researchers, and you’d ask them what WIL is, and they’d say, ‘A boy’s name’.

‘Just what is WIL and what should the outcomes of WIL be because I don’t think they’re clarified enough as yet for academics to make useful learning outcomes attached to those’.

In addition, some perceived that working in a WIL role has a negative impact on their academic career:

‘For an academic, you’re recognised for your contributions through your publications, your grants. In placements or in WIL, there’s nothing.’

Only some staff stated that they received feedback concerning their WIL performance, and participants stated that formal feedback related to their contribution to WIL was minimal. However, feedback from students is common and provides them with an indication of their performance:

‘Students evaluate you in that sense, and if you’re not doing a good job, your students are your critics. But a formal evaluation, getting recognised, there is no such thing.’

2. Resources

The key skills and knowledge that participants thought contributed to their ability to work effectively were: 1. having previously worked in industry, 2. having established contacts, 3. being a good communicator, 4. being passionate about the work and 5. being organised:

‘I think me having existing contacts really helps, my knowledge of the industry, having worked in the industry before coming into university really does help.’

‘I think I’ve got people skills, and I think that’s not only with partners but it’s with the students as well.’

The results suggested that participants enjoy opportunities to meet with other WIL staff, as this encourages the sharing of ideas:

‘We have a group of academics and admin staff across from all the schools that we meet with every trimester, once a trimester and that has really helped to exchange information between staff.’
Participants felt that the Division of Student Life (DSL) and Job Shop (career development services at Deakin University) were great services:

‘Division of Student Life, they’ve been very good. They have provided a lot of support with development questions, coming along and doing sessions for interview skills and resume development.’

Despite the positive resources available, the majority of participants stated that WIL is under-resourced. There is also a lack of funding to be able to offer incentives to industry to create placements. Furthermore, participants felt that resources should better match the growing numbers of students accepted into courses:

‘I think there is a lack of understanding and awareness of how resource intensive WIL is.’

‘Our colleagues who aren’t engaged in WIL at all don’t understand, and so we’re constantly fighting a battle about decision making and control about what happens about our units and the resources we require and the impacts this has on our workloads.’

Some participants perceived a lack of equity in the resources allocated to WIL programs across the university, with larger programs, or courses in which WIL is a requirement for accreditation, receiving greater resources.

3. Stakeholder Engagement and Support

Participants stated that WIL requires the establishment and maintenance of strong relationships with industry. This is particularly important to participants given that a lack of placement opportunities is becoming a major challenge:

‘What I see as my part in terms of WIL, my role in terms of WIL, is to facilitate those relationships, maintain those and strengthen those.’

‘WIL is all about industry engagement.’

Generally, participants felt that they have good team support and relationships with other staff, being beneficial for their WIL roles. However, others noted that greater collaboration would be helpful:

‘It’s helpful that I work in an office which is very collegial and we all support one another.’

‘I think that we really need more of a collaborative approach to WIL.’

The engagement and support provided to students through staff involvement in WIL is regarded as highly enjoyable and one reason why many work in WIL:

‘Now in WIL, we get to know our students very closely, and that’s fantastic.’

‘I’m in this because I love working with the students . . . . I get all my enjoyment out of that.’

Most participants perceive themselves as offering leadership to some degree, irrespective of formal positions of leadership. This is largely through their interaction with industry, students and other staff, and through their initiative in establishing and operating different aspects of WIL programs. Interestingly, participants mentioned that their form of leadership was more shared and team-oriented than hierarchical and traditional.

‘I think I show leadership by thinking of strategies, ways to make it better. It’s definitely a leadership role, definitely a leadership role. You have to coordinate, you have to motivate, you have to strategise, you have to follow-up.’

‘My leadership style is not to be overtly running and directing things. It is about making sure that we’ve got a team involved at all different levels, in different ways and building on people’s strengths and sharing the responsibility.’

Generally, participants felt that they are well supported by local management, but most felt that they would benefit from greater organisational support, mainly in the form of resource allocation. In addition, some staff noted that there would be benefits in having a WIL expert(s), positioned at faculty or university level to offer guidance and knowledge:

‘From a leadership and support point of view, I have absolutely no complaints at all, I’ve received fantastic support.’

‘At an organisational level, there’s very little support.’

Taken together, the interview data and competency analysis suggest that placement co-ordinators operate differently from other academics and as such require unique resources and support.

Discussion

Both the results from the competency analyses and the needs analyses have informed an appropriate structure to support WIL.

Competency Analyses

The hypothesis was supported, with differences being demonstrated between the two types of lecturers. Entrepreneurialism was a defining difference between the two groups. More specifically, seizing opportunities displayed the largest between-group difference. Along with the behaviours of interacting with people and convincing others, seizing opportunities contributes to the entrepreneurial nature found among placement co-
ordinators. This finding is consistent with the desirable behaviours proposed by Cooper and Orrell (1999) who noted that WIL staff who have an entrepreneurial orientation produce positive outcomes.

**Needs analysis**

The needs analysis provided insight into the experience of staff working within WIL at Deakin University. As suggested previously, the university needs to offer these staff the systems, processes and structures that optimise their capacity to conduct WIL. Three key themes arose from the analysis of interviews conducted with WIL staff and key stakeholders. Participants perceived WIL to be undervalued, lacking clear priority within the university and extremely resource intensive. In addition, the results showed the importance of engaging with industry, students and staff, as well as being equipped with particular skills and knowledge, such as having organisational contacts. Staff perceived that they strongly contribute to WIL, but there is inadequate provision of formal recognition.

**Future research**

Given our qualitative rather than quantitative data, and small sample size, the results must be accepted with some degree of caution. Notwithstanding, there do appear to be substantive differences between the competencies of placement coordinators and the control group, which manifest as differences in both the pattern and amplitude of responses.

**Conclusion**

While the findings of this project suggest that the experience of WIL focused staff is generally a positive one, they also highlight areas in which improvement could be sought to assist staff in performing optimally to lead effective WIL programs. Furthermore, the findings from the competency analysis suggest that new position descriptions and job competencies which are distinct from the traditional academic role could be developed for placement co-ordinators. This would ensure that staff selected for such roles are equipped with the appropriate skills and knowledge to perform effectively and that the university can restructure the placement co-ordinator role into one with recognition and its own career structure. This is important to ensure it is facilitating the best possible outcomes of WIL given that’s where the future is heading.

**References**


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