Increasingly embedding workplace and applied learning opportunities within the curriculum: A resource based approach

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Tertiary program curriculum design (in Australia and New Zealand) has increasingly emphasised work based experiential learning opportunities to enhance graduate attributes, employability and collaboration with industry (Freudenberg, Brimble & Cameron, 2009; Patrick, Peach & Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher, & Pretto, 2009; Orrell, 2011). This paper focuses on how resources have been published through Ako Aotearoa (National Centre for Teaching Excellence) to support strategic initiatives related to workplace and applied learning opportunities within the curriculum (Massey University, 2011).

At Massey University, New Zealand, WIL programs are coordinated across five faculties (business, humanities, education, science, and creative arts). Although there is a variety of WIL practice, structured guidelines provide clear outcomes for students, academic and workplace supervisors. The resources were developed through qualitative interview or questionnaire feedback from WIL stakeholders. ‘A Template for Good Practice’ (Martin, Rees & Edwards, 2011), provides a useful overview of key considerations for any tertiary provider either offering or considering WIL as an option for enhancing student learning. Further resources to support increasing WIL practice within tertiary education institutions need to be developed to ensure that the applied part of the whole degree program benefits both the students and organisations involved.

**Key words:** Applied learning, stakeholders, competencies

**Introduction**

Work Integrated Learning (WIL) programs provide a bridge for the student between the academic present and their professional future (Patrick et al., 2009). WIL programmes seek to provide graduates with a comprehensive industry skill set desired by potential employers, in particular the development of behavioural competencies such as self-confidence, communication, customer relationship management, initiative, and relationship building (Archer & Davidson, 2008; Fleming & Ferkins, 2006; Martin & Hughes, 2009). These personal attributes and graduate capabilities are important for success in the workplace (Bell, Crebert, Patrick, Bates & Craggolmi, 2003). Previous research developed three resources ‘How to Make the Most of Work Integrated Learning’ (Martin & Hughes, 2009), which provide useful suggestions for WIL stakeholders to assist in achieving competencies needed in the workplace.

This paper highlights the specific components which, when melded together, enhance the WIL tripartite partnership of employer, academic staff, and student. The student brings to the WIL placement theoretical knowledge, industry skills and prior experiences, which have helped develop the person he or she is now (Boud & Knights, 1996). WIL then provides the opportunity for the student to develop both personal and professional attributes and enhance employability upon graduation. It adds a complementary, professional dimension to academia and builds networks. Done well, WIL benefits each stakeholder within the tripartite relationship.

The aim of this New Zealand case study was to provide an overview of a variety of WIL activities for tertiary providers either offering or considering WIL as an option for enhancing student learning. This study also aims to provide academic supervisor observations about WIL practice from a specific set of university programs for students, lecturers, and employers involved in the pedagogy of WIL so as to positively influence teaching and learning methods.
Method

This study employed a qualitative case study methodology (Bassey, 2003; Stake, 2008), which allowed the researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of the issues of interest and to explore meaning from a number of angles and across different work-based experiential education contexts (Merriam, 1998). Case studies are a common methodological approach used in WIL research because of the highly contextualized nature of such programs (Coll & Chapman, 2000). Semi-structured interview of a convenience sample of fifteen academic supervisors provided a snapshot of WIL activity from across a range of disciplines (e.g. business, creative arts, education, applied & social sciences). The participants related aspects of their WIL programs at Massey University, New Zealand and shared opinions on meeting learning outcomes and the needs of students during the WIL experience. The main research question, from an academic supervisor perspective, was what are the key factors of a WIL program that enhance the development of graduate attributes?

Whilst it is recognized that the extent of generalization from the research is limited, this is concordant with the nature of qualitative and case study research, which seeks to form a unique interpretation of events rather than produce generalizations (Stake, 2008; Yin, 2009). It is expected that the findings of this study will lend themselves to being transferred more widely to, or in other, WIL contexts i.e. by any tertiary provider either offering or considering WIL as an option for enhancing student learning. Human research ethics approval was acquired, which considered issues of confidentiality of participant identities and informed consent.

Results/Discussion

The qualitative data findings focused on six key factors (see Table 1): organization set-up; student preparation; supervision; competencies; pedagogies; and assessment (Martin, Rees & Edwards, 2011).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Good practices for each of the six key factors</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Organisation set- up</td>
<td>4. Competencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Placement requirements and support</td>
<td>a. Self-confidence</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Placement selection and location</td>
<td>b. Communication and people skills</td>
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<td>c. Risk management issues</td>
<td>c. Teamwork</td>
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<td></td>
<td>d. Professional standards</td>
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<td>2. Student preparation</td>
<td>5. Pedagogies</td>
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<tr>
<td>a. Pre-requisites and theoretical basis</td>
<td>a. Scenario based learning and project work</td>
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<td>b. Careers interview skills and CV preparation</td>
<td>b. Theory lectures and labs</td>
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<td>c. Readiness for practice</td>
<td>c. Oral presentations</td>
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<td>3. Supervision</td>
<td>6. Assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>a. On campus academic supervisor/ mentor</td>
<td>a. Learning contract</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Work place employer</td>
<td>b. Reflective journal</td>
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<td>c. Work place university staff</td>
<td>c. Final report</td>
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<td></td>
<td>d. Industry based competency checks</td>
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<td>e. Oral presentations</td>
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The importance of the WIL component to the overall program is highlighted in the following typical quotes:

WIL is the heart of the program …

…. serving as a culmination of theoretical studies...

…. hands on experience... leads to a better graduate

The findings highlight that there are certain foreshadowing considerations that influence WIL set-up. Placement either was specified by the supervisor or was self-selected by the student. Self-selection allows students the capacity to choose an environment or organization about which they feel passionately …the students select the companies they would like, or the type of product or market they want to work in and then they research that company or a number of companies, and then they look for a placement.

Placing commonly requires the university to have a long-standing relationship with the workplace organization. Our relationship with the particular institutions is very close; it needs to be highly professional… so the type of relationship and discussion has to be of mutual trust… the nature of the practice, the nature of the work that we do together has to be on that basis.
Student preparation involves completing pre-requisite academic coursework and career readiness for the WIL placement (Johnston, 2011). “Preparation is important and applied learning can be integrated as part of the whole programme of learning” (Martin, Rees, & Edwards, 2011, p. 37). A lot of the initial preparation is done in papers that they’re doing as pre-requisites. They do lots of lab work and role plays as well as learning about the theories. They get to do some work around ethics and boundaries, supervision, integration of theory.

We prepare them in terms of the knowledge base of skills they need to go into a particular setting… A careers’ person will come in and work with students … [giving] guidance with developing CV and a portfolio.’

Students should also research potential organizations, plan, be proactive and establish clear expectations of the placement and employer (Martin & Leberman, 2005). We have documents that the students have to do before we look at placements for them… they are given specific guidelines of what we want and we check those before they go out.

Student learning is supported through appropriate industry and academic supervision (Martin & Fleming, 2010). By being open minded, observing, listening, asking questions, preparing documents, reflecting and requesting feedback, students develop self-confidence, people and communication skills supported by their supervisor’s positive reinforcement, criticism and feedback. Engaging with different stakeholders and developing a network of contacts is important in enhancing future career opportunities (Martin & Hughes, 2009).

The best resources are the discussions they have from time to time with [the] mentor. [The workplace supervisor is] the local expert… the internship host… someone on the ground who knows intimately what the business is trying to achieve and that kind of thing.

Academic supervisors also highlighted soft skill competencies related to self-confidence, communication and people skills linked to team work and professional standards, which support the student and employer findings of Fleming et al. (2009).

What a lot of practicums do is to give students confidence… They’ve seen how industry works. They can see why their technical skills are going to be wanted by the industry.

A particular strength of the WIL experience is the ability to enhance those soft skills that could not be learnt in the classroom environment (Fleming, Martin, Hughes & Zinn, 2009). Other competencies get developed too… Students encounter the pressures of the workplace… They encounter the politics of the workplace… They’re quite naive when it comes to workplaces.

The teaching methods/pedagogies used consistently include theory-based lectures and labs, oral presentations, scenario-based learning (Kindley, 2002), and project work (Patrick et al., 2008). A variety of compulsory and optional WIL approaches were observed that included both scaffolded and final year projects/placements. Each approach has a place, purpose and constraints for further development that are largely based on strategic decisions within the organization and are contingent on the provision of appropriate organizational support of staff.

When we are teaching theoretical concepts we make them come alive through case-based learning, case studies, role plays, demonstrations, and then when they get into their actual applied papers that intensify more so that by the time they get to their internship they are seeing actual clients… to simulate what it’s going to be like in the real world.

The main forms of assessment are an initial learning contract, followed by a reflective journal, oral presentation, and final report by the student and the supervisors. These forms of assessment support an evidence portfolio approach to WIL, as advocated by Hodges (2011). Formative feedback at various stages of the placement has also been advocated. For example, predetermining learning objectives between the student and academic supervisor before the placement, alongside ongoing feedback between the student and work supervisor during the course of the placement, recognizes that reality may dictate how well or even whether these outcomes can be met.

All of our assessment follows our learning outcomes so everything is tied to those learning outcomes that we’ve set for the papers.

This project supported the findings of Bates (2008) and Cranmer (2006) that the students: … get to see what it’s like in the real world as opposed to the classroom world. They get to figure out whether or not this field of practice is for them or not in terms of clients, and in terms of the profession.
Conclusions/Implications

The work-integrated learning (WIL) experience is increasingly providing a point of difference for students in enhancing their employability. Structured preparation and clear guidelines allow more effective applied learning as part of the whole program. This paper has highlighted that there are a number of considerations to be addressed in the resourcing of effective WIL programs (see Figure 1). These have been collated in to ‘A Template for Good Practice’ (Martin, Rees & Edwards, 2011), which provides a useful overview of key considerations for any tertiary provider either offering or considering WIL as an option for enhancing student learning. This resource supports the previous three resources ‘How to Make the Most of Work Integrated Learning’ (Martin & Hughes, 2009), which provide useful suggestions for WIL stakeholders to assist in achieving competencies needed in the workplace. These are available for download at www.akoaotearoa.ac.nz.

There are a number of accepted forms of WIL, particularly in professional programs. However, issues of access, equity and consistency (stakeholder expectation) need to be reviewed related to the learning outcomes, as does the level of integration (Patrick et al., 2009). WIL policy needs to be driven by institutional policy, which in itself needs to adequately resourced. Further research is needed to validate these current findings in other tertiary organization contexts, and to triangulate with the students themselves and employers or partner institutions, particularly in the development of new programs. In particular, further work is needed to validate the assessment of the soft skills that students learn through WIL.

Figure 1: Factors for WIL good practice (Martin, Rees & Edwards, 2011, p. 9)

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References


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