Development of processes and assessment to facilitate a broad multidisciplinary Work Integrated Learning package

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Work Integrated Learning (WIL) units are often discipline specific and constructed for majors or degrees with a strong vocational orientation. The current paper describes a new undergraduate unit with its genesis in an effective and very successful public relations internship. The original unit enjoyed strong support from industry partners and was instrumental in many graduates securing employment upon or before graduation. The school owning the public relations major also offers majors and degrees in other communications and social sciences disciplines, some vocational and some not. The school sought to capture the eagerness of students to engage in workplace participation, but against an institutional imperative to consolidate teaching activities, creating internships or industry placements for each discipline was out of the question. The principal challenge was to create sufficient genericism without diluting the success enjoyed by the PR internship program or detracting from the need for effective WIL outcomes. The result was a set of processes and assessments and management practices that could be efficiently and readily adopted by any participating discipline. Thus the unit could run every semester and separate disciplines could opt in or out depending upon demand. Efficiencies were to be optimised while still delivering the outcomes desired by students, industry partners, and the academics involved.

Keywords: Work integrated learning, WIL, internship, placement, curriculum, assessment

Background

Work Integrated Learning (WIL) has been defined by Patrick, Peach and Pocknee (2009:iv) as “an umbrella term for a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum.” The prevalence of WIL units in formal education is increasing internationally, with European countries, the United States and Australia paying close attention to providing students with opportunities to meld theoretical knowledge with practice. (Costly, 2006). In the Higher Education sector, improved graduate employability remains a key objective behind the inclusion of WIL unit in degree programs. McIlveen et al (2008:14) define graduate employability as the “relationship between present and future industry and community demands for specific labour (as knowledge and skills), and concomitantly, the labour an individual has to offer. With graduate employability a commonly promoted buyer benefit used by Higher Education institutions in the marketing of their course offerings, tertiary institutions are under increasing pressure to provide ample opportunities to deliver on such promises.

WIL units are often discipline specific and constructed for majors or degrees with a strong vocational orientation. One highly successful program within the School is the public relations internship unit where, on average in 2011, one third of students have been offered employment from their placement providers before graduation. Additionally, there were a number of different WIL-type units existing within the same school (many very similar), leading to duplication in terms of administrative resources. Further, some disciplines did not have the justification or resources to develop their own internship but wished to offer WIL to their students. A recent online survey of 68 students within the school showed that 74.6%(50) would undertake a WIL unit in their discipline if one was available and that 95.6% found WIL to be extremely important (66.2%, 45) or reasonably important (29.4%, 20).

A broad multidisciplinary Work Integrated Learning package

The school sought to leverage the eagerness of students to engage in workplace participation while they were still completing their degrees, but against a backdrop of reducing and consolidating teaching activities creating internships or industry placements for each discipline was not economically viable. The principal challenge was to create sufficient genericism without diluting the success enjoyed by the existing Public Relations internship program or detracting from the need for effective WIL outcomes. Therefore, the development of a broad multidisciplinary WIL package may prove to meet both objectives. A feature of the approach is a generic shell in terms of its theoretical and pedagogical framework, so that a range of disciplines (despite their vast differences) would be able to function effectively, yet autonomously within the shell. This required a curriculum review of all participating disciplines in terms of their current WIL units or how one would fit into their current
courses and close consultation with Discipline Heads in order to maintain the balance between genericism and the distinctiveness of each academic field.

**The development process**

The first step was to gauge interest within the School as to which discipline heads could identify the benefits of a broad multidisciplinary WIL package for their discipline. Emails and face-to-face meetings helped to ascertain that out of 11 disciplines within the School, six disciplines were enthusiastic to be involved in the development of the unit. With the disciplines confirmed, an audit was undertaken on the participating disciplines to answer the following questions:

- Did the discipline already have a WIL unit?
- If so, how was it structured in terms of entry requirements, perquisites, how students were placed, placement hours, contact hours and assessments.
- Could the current unit be disestablished and be absorbed into the broad multidisciplinary WIL package without compromising course accreditation with industry organisations such as the Public Relations Institute of Australia?

Three out of the six disciplines (Public Relations, Social Welfare and Journalism) had existing WIL units and each varied in the conditions that they were questioned about above. Representatives from each discipline communicated regularly via email and teleconference to discuss the similarities and differences between the units in terms of their effectiveness in meeting their objectives of improving graduate employability and efficient use of resources.

While there were differences between existing units, a number of similarities were discovered, especially in terms of the administrative process in terms of managing students undergoing internships or practical placements.

Employer agreement paperwork is one example. It is a requirement of the University that the placement provider, the student and the unit coordinator sign an agreement that lists the legal requirements of all parties involved in the placement process. However, the University does not offer a standardised form and as a result, each discipline within the School has created their own. Such duplicatory processes will be streamlined in order to save time and resources.

To further accommodate the differing requirements for each discipline, broad ranging and non-specific terms were to be utilised in the unit description. For example:

**Contact and placement hours**

Students are required to attend two hours of generic internship seminar/discussion plus two hours of discipline-specific seminar/discussion at the start and end of the semester to deal with expectations (of and from students), assessment, procedures, policies, etc. The remainder of the time (approximately 12 hours per week across 10 weeks) will be spent on assessment tasks, participation in online discussion, assembling a portfolio, and engaging in internship activity, consisting of a further 70 to 160 hours of internship in a relevant workplace approved by the discipline supervisor.

Providing a broad scope provides leeway for a range of disciplines to take advantage of a WIL opportunity for their students that they may not have had previously. Whilst one Unit Coordinator will manage the administrative processes for the school, each discipline would supply a supervisor to deal with their discipline’s students throughout the WIL process. This would reduce the need and the costs involved with having a unit coordinator for each discipline.

A similar process was involved with developing the assessment tasks for this unit.

**Assessment development**

The group discussed at length what assessment tasks would be most appropriate in meeting our objectives of improving graduate employability and increasing efficiency within the School. The three units had some tasks that were similar for example, a reflective diary written by the student detailing their learning and development throughout the placement. Therefore by gleaning the elements from the most effective assessment tasks from each existing WIL unit and taking full consideration of the requirements of the disciplines new to WIL the following tasks were approved:
Again, the titles of these tasks encapsulate the objectives of those from the existing WIL units, yet are broad enough for each discipline supervisor to customise them for their own students. Similarly, while the unit guide for this unit would contain the generic information, an insert developed by each discipline supervisor will be developed to further explain the interpretation of the unit for their relevant discipline.

**Discussion and further research**

The Faculty of Arts recently approved the proposal for this unit to commence at the beginning of the 2013 academic year. From that time the experiences of students and staff associated with the unit will be tracked to determine its effectiveness in meeting its objectives. If it is successful, it could pave the way for other disciplines, which are normally not associated with WIL, to offer students a work placement experience. Furthermore, it could also begin the discussion around what similar units from differing disciplines being redeveloped in the same way.

**References**


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