Bringing it all Together: An overview of the delivery of key work-integrated learning (WIL) initiatives at Flinders University

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Flinders University is dedicated to providing a valuable and consolidating WIL experience for its students. To achieve this, the University designed a strategy and set goals for the implementation and management of WIL activities. The first step was to undertake a comprehensive audit to determine its position at that time, then to develop set of ‘reactive’ initiatives to address issues that were highlighted during the audit process. The effectiveness of these initiatives is in the process of being evaluated, whilst at the same time we move into a more ‘proactive’ stage to bring it all together: to help define the future direction of WIL and maximise the ‘meaningfulness’ of these activities. The purpose of this paper is to examine the approaches being utilised by Flinders in embedding good practice across the University by developing systems of control, as part of a proactive approach to WIL development and implementation. It will provide a background to key activities and major initiatives in measuring the impact of WIL at Flinders, briefly evaluate their delivery, and consider future implications.

Keywords: embed, evaluation, meaningfulness, policy, strategy, WIL

Introduction

Flinders University has long recognised the importance of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) as a “…tool for maximising student learning opportunities” (Smigiel and Macleod, 2010). Over recent years, existing WIL practices across the University have been reviewed and redeveloped, with the aim of maximising their effectiveness. In addition, new practices and policies have been developed. A combination of this ‘proactive’ and ‘reactive’ approach has subsequently been utilised by the University to identify existing good practice and to develop and deliver new practices, with the long term goal of improving the ‘meaningfulness’ and maintaining the momentum of successful WIL delivery at Flinders (Smigiel and Macleod, 2010). The question we now ask ourselves is - are we achieving this?

Background

The world of WIL is an ever-changing, dynamic environment. To ensure that WIL experiences offered to our students meet the changing requirements of this environment, we must be able to adapt to the needs of all stakeholders (i.e. students, university staff and external organisations). Beer (1981) recognises the need for a viable organisation to react within a complex external environment, and identifies the need for a system of ‘control’ as one of the vital components in achieving an effective organisational response. Other components identified by Beer: implementation; coordination; intelligence; and policy have been addressed by the University (Smigiel, Macleod 2010). However, the development of a system of control required further development.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the approach being utilised by Flinders in embedding good practice across the University by developing systems of control. It will provide a background to key activities/major initiatives in measuring the impact of WIL at Flinders, briefly evaluate their delivery, and future implications.

Key Activities

‘Managing WIL’ Workshops

Background
Flinders University offers a suite of staff development and support opportunities, including a comprehensive ‘Managing Work-Integrated Learning’ series of workshops, held biannually. These workshops are compulsory for all new staff involved in leading and organising WIL activities, but also provide new and relevant information for existing staff. The workshops introduce: the requirements of the University’s WIL Policy; case studies of good practice; phases of WIL and assessment; career development; staff and student advisory and preparatory programs; and how to deal with common issues such as marginally performing students in a WIL context. The workshops are developed and delivered by the Centre for University Teaching (CUT), with input from relevant WIL experts across the University.

**Evaluation**

The CUT, as the central provider of these staff development opportunities, has begun to evaluate their perceived meaningfulness through an analysis of attendee feedback collated over the past three years. Whilst workshop attendance and completion has remained relatively constant each year (averaging 16 completions annually), 2012 has brought a significant increase in demand for attendance (16 completions to date, with 21 enrolled and 9 on a waiting list for the next 2012 workshop). This increase in demand reflects greater general awareness of WIL and its implementation requirements across the University. Demand is strong enough to consider increasing the number of workshop offerings per year.

Of the attendees that have completed the workshops since 2009, 75% of participants that responded rated both the impact (the extent that the course enabled them to better understand WIL) and content (usefulness of content in meeting their working needs) as Good or Excellent. It has been noted, however, that the feedback resulting from recent larger class sizes has been marginally lower than smaller classes, and leads us to question if there is a relationship between class size and effectiveness.

**Implications**

Demand for attendance at these workshops is likely to continue to increase in line with WIL policy implementation. Should we therefore consider delivering more bespoke workshops to cater for the differing needs of attendees (e.g. at Faculty-level or specifically targeted at academic or general staff, not both, as we currently do), or is a more general, all-encompassing means of delivery still the most appropriate? How can we be more innovative in the delivery of the course to reach staff unable to attend in person?

**On-line learning modules: ‘PrePlace’**

**Background**

Preparing students prior to undertaking a WIL placement is the responsibility of the University and an important stepping stone in ensuring the placement is meaningful and considered a success by all parties. The CUT has developed an interactive online student preparatory resource entitled ‘PrePlace’ which revitalises and updates its 2003 predecessor. PrePlace was designed internally by a cross-University working group, to ensure the resource was appropriate and applicable to all students. The resulting resource is accessible from within the University’s online learning system and contains three modules covering administrative procedures concerning their placement, Occupational Health and Safety responsibilities and more general topics including work-life balance, accepting and utilising feedback, and professional presentation and attitudes. PrePlace is currently available for staff involved in managing WIL to use as part of their student preparation prior to placement.

**Evaluation**

At the time of writing, PrePlace is in the process of being rolled out across the University. It is expected around 500 students will complete PrePlace in the next 12 months, from within the School of Computer Science, Engineering and Mathematics, the School of Education, the Flinders Business School and the School of Nursing. Formal feedback will be sought to evaluate the resource to ensure that it is, and remains, an effective tool for student preparation, and evaluation materials are being prepared accordingly. In the meantime, the fact that it is being applied across such a wide variety of disciplines provides a very strong indication of its potential success.

**Next steps**

Research will begin in the next few months to determine if other modules in the PrePlace format are justified, with ones for University-based WIL supervisors, workplace-based student supervisors and host organisations being considered for development.

**WIL Policy**
**Background**

In October 2010, Flinders launched a new WIL policy and associated guidelines, with a stated commitment to review its implementation after one year (Flinders University, 2010). The policy defined WIL at Flinders and identified the need to design, organise, supervise and assess these activities. It also recognised the need to promote good working relationships with host organisations and to develop appropriate administrative procedures, in addition to providing guidance on relevant topic design.

**Evaluation**

A University-wide review of WIL policy implementation was undertaken late 2011. This took the form of the submission of Faculty-based reports on compliance with the policy. This was a major information collation exercise, highlighting where the policy has been successfully implemented and where further information or support is required. It also highlighted examples of good practice and, conversely, areas where there appear to be problems with interpretation or implementation. Results are still in the process of being interpreted, but information collated has been useful in providing a broad picture of the implementation of WIL at Flinders. This review process has proven to be a successful form of control particularly in identifying areas within the University that require more hands-on support in implementing the WIL policy, mostly in those areas where WIL does not take the form of a traditional placement.

**Implications**

A policy review report is in the process of being developed by the CUT and the Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic). Key areas of action include the need to: work closely with Schools across the University in their development of host organisation agreements to ensure compliance with the policy; consolidation of existing documentation; the preparation of University-wide template host agreements; and the development of ‘how to’ guides for creating and implementing new WIL programs. The final review report will contain further recommendations pertinent to maximising the effective implementation of the WIL policy.

**Placement Management System: InPlace**

**Background**

In 2010, the University’s Student Systems team, with input from interested parties across Flinders, including the CUT, acquired a placement management system to be implemented and used across the University. The system selected has been operational since late 2010 and full roll-out to all interested Schools should be completed by the end of 2012.

**Evaluation**

In 2010, 2,457 placements were organised through the new placement management system, with 3,439 in 2011 and already 1,754 in the first half of 2012. As an early adopter of this technology, some growing pains were encountered but the software vendor is responsive to issues and suggestions and the software is increasingly meeting the needs of users across the University. An evaluation of the system against the initial goals is yet to be undertaken by the Student Systems department.

**Next steps**

Now that the placement management system has been implemented and populated with data about host organisations and which topics have a WIL component (at least of the traditional ‘placement’ style), we need to question how to use this data to better engage with stakeholders and to identify other ways of using the data to increase our knowledge on how WIL is being managed across the University (e.g. investigating areas where fewer WIL opportunities are being undertaken and taking steps to improve participation).

**Conclusion**

As reported in previous papers (Smigiel and Harris, 2007, Smigiel and Macleod, 2008 and Smigiel and Macleod, 2010), Flinders University has undergone a significant period of change during recent years, in terms of identifying and improving WIL practice across the University. We are now at a point where we need to evaluate our position and embed good practice. A number of key activities have been implemented and their impact is being, or will be, evaluated. One of the most significant developments during this time is the centralised focus that has been developed, primarily by the CUT, which coordinates and evaluates approaches to WIL delivery from a University perspective. The CUT therefore represents an overall system of ‘control’ in monitoring the meaningfulness of WIL, and adapting its approach accordingly. In an ever-changing, dynamic environment that is WIL, we need to be vigorous in our approach to its delivery to ensure we continue to meet the needs of stakeholders.
References

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