

High-risk, high-stake relationships: building effective industry-university partnerships for Work Integrated Learning (WIL)

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Many industry peak and professional bodies advocate students undertake professional work placements as a key work integrated learning (WIL) experience in accredited university degree courses. However, mismatched expectations and gaps in the way industry partners (IPs) are supported during these work placements can place these high-stake alliances at risk. A review of models and strategies supporting industry partners indicates many are contingent on the continued efforts of well-networked individuals in both universities and IP organisations to make these connections work. It is argued that whilst these individuals are highly valued they often end up representing a whole course or industry perspective, not just their area of expertise. Sustainable partnership principles and practices with shared responsibility across stakeholder groups are needed instead. This paper provides an overview of work placement approaches in the disciplines of business, engineering and urban development at an Australian, metropolitan university. Employing action research and participatory focus group methodologies, it gathers and articulates recommendations from associated IPs on practical suggestions and strategies to improve relationships and the resultant quality of placements.

Keywords: risk, work integrated learning (WIL), high-stake partnerships, Industry Partners (IPs)

Introduction

Australian universities are experiencing overwhelming pressure to meet increasing industry requirements for work-ready graduates (Peach & Matthews, 2011; Patrick, Peach, Pocknee et al, 2009; A.C. Nielsen Research Services, 2000; Universities Australia, 2008). As a result most institutions have increased curricular opportunities for students to engage in diverse forms of work integrated learning (WIL). These opportunities seek to improve work-readiness and retention, promoting social inclusion and fostering student career development (Smith et al, 2009). Evidence suggests work placement opportunities enhance student engagement and learning, but improved engagement between universities and IPs is urgently needed (Patrick, Peach, Pocknee et al, 2009). The *Australian Workforce Futures Report* (Skills Australia, 2010) has formulated a new approach to partnerships for workforce development, to be led by government and industry, with the Council of Australian Governments, Ministerial Councils for tertiary education, industry, workplace relations, regional development and industry peak bodies endorsing a National Workforce Development Reform Agreement and committing to industry-wide implementation. It further recommends the establishment of a 'Workforce Development Observatory' for workforce collaboration.

In this broader national context the resourcing of WIL in higher education has become a vital consideration as evidenced by the inclusion of a discussion around its high cost in the federal government's *Base Funding Review* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2010a and 2010b). To enable more students to experience 'authentic' WIL through real work engagement, understanding of effective industry-university partnerships must be optimised. This paper provides an overview of national and international strategies for supporting IPs; an overview of work placement programs in the disciplines of business, engineering, and urban development at a large, industry-linked university; consideration of recommendations from associated IPs; and a summary of practical suggestions and strategies.

'Partnerships' and boundary spanning – the interface between IPs, students and universities

Recent WIL literature highlights the vital nature of responsive partnerships between IPs, students and universities to augment the benefit of WIL. Peach et al (2011) borrow from organisational psychology in invoking such partnerships as boundary spanning. An acute understanding of partner requirements implicates the need for IPs, students and universities to forge connections across diverse communities of practice. Wenger

(1998 cited in Zaitseva & Mitchell, 2007) describes boundary spanners as brokers between communities possessing cross-cultural and communication skills apt for implementing successful connections within various organisational frames.

Boundary spanning characteristics include:

- having a wide array of contacts and exceptional interpersonal skills;
- being effective disseminators of information;
- being trusted and respected by diverse stakeholders;
- understanding the organisational complexities of collaboration;
- convening diverse and eclectic partners around shared concerns;
- moving flexibly within and between communities and organisations (Miller, 2008).

The functions of boundary spanning have been classified into key activities, such as representing, transacting, administering, scanning, monitoring, protecting, and linking (Pruitt & Schwartz, 1999). The key activity of linking in this context is exemplified by the offering by Queensland University of Technology (QUT) of real world placements, projects, case studies, simulations, guest lectures and workshops (Peach, et al, 2011). The active and conscious participation, cooperation and collaboration of stakeholders might be deemed partnership, suggests Fleming (2012) but the nature and the quality of the partnership depends ultimately on each partner's engagement and their levels of interaction. It seems probable that a lack of shared understanding of meaning and purpose, along with differing stakeholder expectations and motivations regarding WIL, pose a high level of risk to such potentially valuable partnerships.

A desktop audit of strategies adopted by Australian universities to manage relationships with IPs reveals the following examples:

- Deakin University provides web resources for IPs on insurance, relevant contacts, and confidentiality;
- Flinders University has a website designed to educate IPs about WIL, including case studies and press articles, contacts and a central way to register interest;
- La Trobe University has similarly tailored its portal to direct IPs towards discipline contacts and information;
- Macquarie University, featuring international internships, focuses upon the information needs of IPs;
- Murdoch University's WIL website targets industry with a PDF downloadable kit about WIL benefits and how to get involved;
- The University of Newcastle has an all-inclusive WIL website with detailed information for IPs, with emphasis on the use of 'learning contracts' to manage partnerships;
- The University of Western Sydney also provides detailed IP information;
- Victoria University presents a WIL DVD.

Ako Aotearoa, the New Zealand Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence, has recently published four resources to support the development of WIL programs in tertiary organisations. The first three booklets *How to Make the Most of Work Integrated Learning* (Martin & Hughes, 2009) are based on research related to graduate attributes/competencies, whilst the fourth *A Template for Good Practice* (Martin, Rees & Edwards, 2011), provides an overview of key areas in WIL.

At QUT WIL is an integral component of curriculum design, where WIL units are integrated in curriculum and assessment. Existing in various forms such as placement, internship, virtual placement, and co-operative education, these approaches underpin the university's vision to build mutually beneficial and long-term outcomes and to integrate the ethos of WIL across whole courses (Peach & Matthews, 2011). University policy identifies IPs as responsible for affording students a safe work environment, suitable induction and training, a positive learning environment with varied experiences, and guidance and mentoring in professional behaviour. A gap exists, however, in the provision of consistent and accessible support to IPs. Whilst identifying the responsibilities of all stakeholders, what is lacking is a systematic approach to supporting IPs to manage expectations and experiences of different WIL stakeholders spanning the boundaries between university and the workplace. The next section reports on feedback from IPs in the disciplines of business, engineering, and urban development on ways to improve these high-risk high-stake relationships and minimise the risks of possible partnerships not realising their potential.

WIL models in QUT Business, Engineering and Urban Development

Students from advertising, marketing, public relations, and international business disciplines at QUT Business School can undertake an elective internship as a WIL unit. The internship is available to undergraduate students over three semesters per year, where up to 100 students participate in a semester. Students complete a minimum of 120 hours work placement in industry over a thirteen week semester. They locate their own placement in agencies or consultancies, government departments and/or not-for-profit organisations, or apply for placements and projects advertised on the university's CareerHub site or through other contacts.

In contrast in the disciplines of engineering and urban development WIL is practised as placement, is mandatory, and often paid. The onus is on undergraduate students to locate a work placement and to negotiate its terms. Most students commence a placement from second or third year, and undertake a 12 credit point WIL unit in final year (approximately 1000 students per year). This distinguishes the model from those where work placement and WIL units occur simultaneously. In this model responsibility is with students and IPs to negotiate the arrangement with minimal university intervention. Depending on the sub-discipline students are required to complete from 30 to 90 days of discipline-relevant work experience. This model also offers the opportunity for students to undertake a WIL minor (up to five units).

In both instances, learning activities from purposefully designed curricula guide students. Focusing on workplace experiences and facets of career development learning (CDL), students develop strategies for ongoing professional development and 'lifewide learning' (Jackson, 2011). Successful participation requires the maintenance of reflective journals, field notes, and work logs evidencing workplace learning. Table 1 summarises the features of these models.

Table 1 Comparative WIL features: QUT business, engineering and urban development disciplines

WIL Features	Disciplines	
	Business	Engineering and Urban Development
Type of WIL	Internship	Work Placement
Status	Elective	Mandatory
Disciplines	Undergraduate advertising, marketing, public relations and international business in business	Undergraduate engineering and urban development
Duration	120 hours over 13-week period	30-90 days depending on discipline
When offered	3 times per year including summer	3 times per year including summer
Paid/unpaid	Usually unpaid	Usually paid
Method of matching student-IP	Students secure placement through applying for opportunities negotiated by the university, or through their own research and networks, and negotiate work program with IP and academic supervisor	Students find own placement, negotiate work program and register placement with Faculty
Preparation for WIL	Opportunities advertised on unit's Blackboard site. Students apply for and undergo interview and selection process with IPs. Completion of preparatory online career modules devised by Careers and Employment includes focus on aspects of ethics, confidentiality re intellectual property, student resilience and workplace expectations	Community Blackboard site provides tools on finding a work placement; what to do during a work placement; and completing a WIL unit. Workshops are also provided each semester on <i>Preparing for WIL</i>
Context	Up to 100 students per semester	250-350 students per semester
Delivery	Face-to-face sessions supplemented by weekly optional online chat sessions facilitated by academic staff	Blended delivery, introductory face-to-face seminar, webinars facilitated by academic staff through the semester of enrolment in WIL unit/s
Assessment	Development of internship plan,	Two reports based on observation,

	job application including responses to selection criteria, reflective poster or digital story about experience	reflection, and participation in workplace experiences and ongoing personal, professional development
Other requirements	Reflective blog, IP feedback.	Reflective field notes, work logs, IP feedback.

One issue arising from these models derives from the students' ability to negotiate a program of work with the IP. Associated challenges reside in the IP being able to provide appropriate supervision once the program is negotiated, where both student and IP take responsibility for the success of the experience. Fleming (2012) argues that the state of university-IP partnerships can be precarious and can fail to be realised as partnerships if there is not a similar degree of commitment and motivation on both sides.

What do IPs want?

A 2011 collaborative engagement project between business, engineering, and urban development provided the opportunity to scope existing approaches to WIL partnerships. A series of focus groups with relevant IPs was conducted. Three, two-hour focus groups were held in mid-2011. Thirty participants were invited, with twelve attending from government departments, advertising agencies, communication and public relations consultancies, and engineering and construction companies. Participants were asked to consider questions such as what motivates them to continue to provide WIL opportunities for students, what constitutes a successful WIL experience, how to manage the challenge of supervising WIL students, and what additional information, support and resources could QUT provide. An analysis of these recorded discussions yielded common themes related to communication, mutual expectations, student resilience, and confidentiality.

The need for "clearly communicated expectations" from QUT was flagged, so that IPs understand exactly what is required of them. Several wanted far greater precision in the communication of expectations as these were considered to not be sufficiently spelled out in current practice. The university response to this, collected through interviewing academic staff, was that while they try to articulate expectations, WIL experiences are potentially quite different and often have to be negotiated on a case by case basis. It was further asserted that "expectations [when hosting WIL students] are high", suggesting aligned expectations between academic staff and students but that IPs don't always understand students' WIL aspirations. One IP highlighted:

The companies don't really value the work of WIL students and don't know the questions to ask them, don't know what tasks they can be beneficially assigned.

This lack of familiarity with the skills, attributes and potential that students bring has been described as an 'expectations gap' (Patrick, Peach & Pocknee, 2009). Whilst overarching expectations are articulated through generic learning contracts and/or internship plans this area needs further clarification. For example, one respondent added:

It is necessary to have clarity about the kind of placement – does it involve a mentoring relationship? Is the student a project assistant to someone in the company? Is job shadowing to occur?

Those IPs represented in the focus groups agreed that expectations should be set from the start e.g. whether the placement was project based or not and what assessment was required. Again, students and/or WIL academic staff must take care to communicate this information clearly and stress that expectations have a tendency to evolve and change in certain instances. There was agreement that the university must work harder in setting expectations around robust initial and ongoing discussions between the student and IP.

Other respondents highlighted the benefits of a rigorous selection process and matching between student and IP. Unfortunately the resources needed to match large cohorts of students (e.g. in engineering and urban development) are not available and students and IPs are expected to be proactive. It makes sense that the responsibility for accurate matching is located more intensely in the IP-student negotiation process, especially in situations where there are strong IP expectations that the WIL student "will match a need and deliver". Yet despite highlighting the resourcing restrictions, respondents argued that IPs need ongoing university support to help manage students on work placement and that greater energy needs to be directed to the early stages of initiating and undertaking the work placement. It was also suggested that IPs be encouraged to conduct their

own reviews on the conclusion of the work placement to ascertain lessons learned from the experience for next time. Another suggestion was that devising a list of requirements for students to meet during their workplace placement was a way of addressing current mismatches.

Focus group participants affirmed students need to have realistic expectations about teamwork and fitting into organisational cultures and settings. Students are prepared for teamwork through the university's strong emphasis on group assessment, although in the workplace teamwork is at times more closely linked to productivity. Respondents also reported some students had unrealistic expectations about the level or type of work they would be undertaking on placement. IPs also reported the need for students to be more resilient when receiving workplace feedback and instructions. The development of resilience is closely linked to learning how to reflect and (re)constitute professional identity (Ryan & Ryan, 2011). It was suggested that workplace exposure, in the form of industry case studies, industry lectures and CDL, should be introduced to students early in their degree. Some IPs reported instances where placement students had not paid due attention to protocols of confidentiality in a way that might damage commercial-in-confidence projects. The formation of professional identity does not happen instantaneously but respondents agreed that more could be done early in the degree to address professional ethics.

Practical suggestions and strategies

Whilst the focus group feedback highlights the value of WIL it also points to a gap in understanding of the different roles of the stakeholders and the meaning and purpose of the activity. Table 2 summarises suggestions from IPs on principles and practices that could help improve relationships and the quality of placements. These have then been formulated into achievable responses and recommendations to be implemented over a longer term, arrived at on the basis of shared expert knowledge.

Table 2 Five broad strategies to improve industry-university partnerships

IP suggestion	Achievable response by university	Further suggestions
Define placement expectations	Template of expectations customised according to situation	Implement WIL checklist for IP and student and expand use of learning contracts; IP and university to collaboratively benchmark skills and knowledge
Improve communication of expectations	IPs to email WIL staff; IPs to conduct own reviews of lessons learned from WIL experiences; identify multiple champions	Implement training in supervision – making expectations clear but also highlighting diversity
Improve matching and selection of student and IP	Develop signed agreement between IP and student detailing mutual commitment	Use boundary spanning to invigorate partnerships and encourage student and IP to assume mutual responsibility
Improve management of placement	Support IPs via email and phone to resolve issues	Post strategies for managing placement and supervision on university website
Improve student understanding of workplace culture	Integrate CDL modules into courses in early years building student agency, resilience, teamwork protocols, ethics, and respect for confidentiality	Integrate WIL into whole course

Attention must be directed towards students and IPs in the initial framing of the placement and the negotiation of the relationship and expectations. Use of a learning contract is critical here (Larkin & Beatson, 2010). Most students require assistance to develop as agentic and lifewide learners, through opportunities for critical reflection and peer learning. Within resource constraints the university has to find ways to enhance IPs' understanding of WIL and required supervisory skills. The suggestions in Table 2 will be explored further in the next phase of this research with a focus on developing supervisory skills for WIL; developing checklists for WIL and use of learning contracts; encouraging students to be agentic; developing online resources to support IPs in placement management; and intensifying the integration of WIL and CDL over courses and in core and capstone units.

A focus on developing supervisory skills will enable the development of effective characteristics of workplace supervision identified by Cooper, Orrell & Bowden (2010). That is, asking questions; seeking clarification; demanding analysis of interactions; requesting an evaluation of workplace effectiveness; exploring the use of affective and interpersonal skills; testing student knowledge and understanding; connecting practice knowledge with theoretical constructs; and modelling mental processes by verbalising practice thinking. A more extensive use of learning contracts will help clarify mutual expectations and facilitate collaboration between students and IPs to develop learning goals, timelines, and placement details. Since the focus groups, QUT has worked with IPs to develop their supervisory skills through the delivery of face-to-face workshops for IPs in Business and Law, matched by review and refinement of workbooks and other support materials for IPs. These workshops are the basis for workshops for QUT as an IP, where QUT staff members supervise students undertaking placements within a QUT work environment. An institution-wide approach documenting conditions of work placement has also been developed, to clearly define conditions of placement for the institution, student, and IP. In an associated way, the Innovative Research Universities recently completed a project around the development of supervisory resources and checklists for IPs.

Conclusion

This investigation of high-risk, high-stake WIL relationships in the discipline contexts of business, engineering and urban development has yielded a multi-dimensional perspective on the challenges of building sustainable relationships with existing and potential partners. The focus group discussions identified strategies having the potential to take WIL beyond reliance on the efforts of key individuals to an adaptable and transferable framework to better manage stakeholder expectations, responsibilities and experiences. The next phase of this research will canvass IP and student reactions to these recommendations, scoping a format for supervisory training for IPs, along with the production of relevant resources.

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