Transitioning undergraduate students from Law, Business, and Creative Arts towards Work Integrated Learning Capstone Experiences

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The Faculty of Law, Business and Creative Arts at JCU offers undergraduate degrees at each of its campuses in Cairns, Townsville, Brisbane and Singapore. To date, each campus / degree has offered a diverse range of work-integrated learning (WIL) components and practices, causing issues for both students and academics in terms of sequential integration and consistency of practice. The challenge has been to design a wholly integrated WIL program that can be implemented across all locations, taking into account contextual issues relevant to each campus and degree. The new faculty WIL program includes a scaffolded approach within each degree, at both foundational and developmental levels to maximise preparedness for common advanced WIL capstone experiences. At the capstone level all students choose from one of three final year units, each requiring them to identify meaningful and sustainable outcomes and solutions to the challenges inherent to an increasingly complex and globalized society. This paper will discuss the development, challenges, implementation and feedback strategies involved in designing a WIL framework to cater to a diverse student body.

**Keywords:** WIL, Sequential, Capstone, Multidisciplinary, Collaboration

**Introduction**

The emergence of an increasingly diverse range of work-integrated learning (WIL) activities in undergraduate degree courses, confirms that the integration of theory with the practice of work provides rich and contextualized learning experiences for students, as well as responding to student and employer demand for more ‘work-ready’ graduates (Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher & Pretto 2008). Yet for WIL to provide the greatest opportunity for student learning it has also been acknowledged that there must be systematic and purposely designed curriculum that recognizes the importance of incremental development and where capstone subjects are involved, the relevance of WIL to these culminating experiences (Freudenberg, Brimble & Cameron 2010, McNamara, Kift, Field, Butler, Brown & Gamble 2010).

The synergy between capstone experiences and WIL can be seen in the broad and mutual objectives of providing transition (through development of graduate attributes and employability skills) and closure (through professional and cultural discipline awareness)(Patrick et al 2008). However it has been argued that the two are not necessarily interchangeable and that “WIL alone will rarely assure all of the desirable elements of a capstone experience”(McNamara et al 2010). Stand alone WIL subjects having limited integration with the degree as a whole, and with the final year in particular, are therefore unlikely to fulfil the objectives of a true capstone experience. Prior to a recent curriculum refresh of degrees in business, law and creative arts at JCU, there was limited purposeful coordination of WIL activities to ensure student preparedness for final year transition experiences. The challenge in this recent redesign has been to ensure that a comprehensive WIL program incorporates both horizontal and vertical alignment, beginning in first year and culminating in a final year that carefully situates best practice capstone design principles.

**Contextual issues of relevance**

The design of one WIL program, transferable across three diverse degree programs and containing a number of different disciplines (in the case of business and creative arts), was complicated by the fact that the University has several campuses, at metropolitan (Singapore and Brisbane) and regional (Cairns and Townsville) locations. In addition, the Brisbane and Singapore campuses cater primarily to international students which, when offering internships, gives rise to distinctive considerations (language and cultural) and visa restrictions (Singapore). In our regional centres, one key challenge is the fact that there are limited and less diverse industry partner opportunities than can be found in metropolitan locations.
However, as our research and consultations progressed it became apparent that the challenges could be construed as opportunities and used to create a distinctive experience for both students and staff which value adds to our University’s broad strategic intent as a University for the tropics. The design, as outlined below, ensures that through sequentially developed WIL activities, engaging with local and regional industry partners will facilitate an appreciation of place and identity, and assist students to become resilient, accountable citizens adaptive to regional problems, often with global roots. This in turn will promote cross-disciplinary research opportunities for academic staff concomitant with our faculty focus on sustainability in curriculum design and research themes of Industries and Economies in the Tropics and Peoples and Societies in the Tropics.

**Program design – existing practice**

The project team engaged in an analysis of existing WIL activities across the three schools in the Faculty and which revealed there was already a considerable amount of activity in this area. Existing activities included work placements or internships, project-based work with and for industry or community, simulations, scenarios and field trips. It was also the case however that these activities were largely driven by individual staff, rather than being systematic or sequentially developmental across a degree program. That is, while there was certainly WIL activity, connections could not be made between or across these various activities in any formal or meaningful way. In addition, there were significant variations in relation to the use of capstone subjects across the degrees, ranging from no application in some cases to those where a capstone was firmly embedded in the final semester and with significant evidence-based success (Fleischmann & Hutchison 2010).

**Embedding a sequential and integrated framework**

In order to respond to this scenario and develop a Faculty-wide approach that could be coordinated and sustainable, the project team set out to develop a framework that could be applied across all degrees. The principles of constructivist learning theory (e.g. Fosnot 2005) would underpin the overarching framework for the WIL program, given that one of the key goals was to enable students to progressively build their knowledge of work-related processes and realities in a sequentially developmental manner. The WIL activities and learning experiences would therefore increase in complexity over the three years and also the extent to which students would be responsible for their own learning. That is, the capstone subjects would be student-centred and based on project work where staff would act as guides and facilitators and where industry and/or community would be active participants in the learning process. In relation to the capstones, students would be able to choose from three: an independent project linked to the workplace, a formal internship in industry, or a multi-disciplinary collaborative project that responds to a demonstrated industry or community need. Table 1 below provides an overview of the program planned for full implementation across the undergraduate degrees.
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<th>Level</th>
<th>Core principles</th>
<th>Example activities / projects</th>
<th>Learning Objectives</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Foundation</strong> (year 1)</td>
<td>Learning is largely through observation and simulation</td>
<td>Visits to industry sites or locations (e.g. galleries, law courts, commercial settings, laboratories)</td>
<td>• Observe and appraise problem solving in real world discipline specific areas</td>
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<td>Reflection is where students demonstrate engagement with WIL concepts</td>
<td>Guest lectures from practitioners about industry realities and/or developments</td>
<td>• Apply classroom knowledge to real world hypothetical scenarios and/or 'real' industry problem within controlled environment</td>
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<td>Some use of in-house project activities or scenarios</td>
<td>Students critically assess and/or re-design an internal document and/or system (e.g. posters, workflow procedures, data systems)</td>
<td>• Explain the purpose and complexity of group work and demonstrate how teamwork can be implemented to produce a simple group outcome</td>
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<td>Introductory group work</td>
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<td>• Describe what is meant by ‘professional identity’ and ethical behavior</td>
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<td>• Describe what is meant by reflective practice and apply through simple reflective exercises</td>
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<td><strong>Developmental</strong> (year 2 or years 2 and 3 for a 4-year program)</td>
<td>Students are active participants in WIL activities</td>
<td>Groups of students create a product for an external client (e.g. website, HR induction manual, market analysis and report)</td>
<td>• Demonstrate and evaluate the effectiveness of group work in producing a project outcome</td>
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<td>Students work with an external client but via an internally managed project and structured environment</td>
<td>External clients play a role in the assessment of student work (e.g. Mooting, concept development)</td>
<td>• Apply developing problem solving and analytical skills to ‘real’ industry problem within controlled environment</td>
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<td>Students are able to demonstrate and test industry or professional skills and attributes</td>
<td>Students are placed in live workplace scenarios e.g. events management, industry/workplace observations</td>
<td>• Compare and contrast how different perspectives can be used to evaluate project outcomes</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Communicate effectively with diverse audiences</td>
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<td>• Explain and demonstrate how reflective practice can improve learning outcomes</td>
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<td>Capstone (final year and semester)</td>
<td>Students are able to adopt a leadership role within their chosen capstone The capstone requires students to engage directly with industry or the profession Students are required to demonstrate how their learning culminates in their chosen capstone and project</td>
<td>Students who design an independent project do so in consultation with employers and for a demonstrated workplace or industry need Multi-disciplinary teams of students respond to an industry brief or problem and present this in a relevant public setting Students undertake negotiated internships involving the completion of specific tasks and activities</td>
<td>Apply classroom knowledge and skills gained throughout the degree to solve complex real world industry issues and produce a large scale project outcome Convey information clearly and fluently, in high quality written form appropriate for professional audience Demonstrate essential knowledge necessary for a career in chosen profession Demonstrate the ability to work collaboratively, in particular in a cross-discipline team and where required to effectively manage and lead a team Demonstrate skills relevant to chosen industry within a professional setting Demonstrate an awareness of ethical and social responsibility in professional practice Identify, evaluate and action learning opportunities and self-improvements</td>
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**Implementation and resourcing**

In order to create a sustainable framework for the ongoing viability and delivery of the WIL program, a number of key strategies and steps were identified as critical, including:

- The appointment of a Faculty project officer, who in partnership with the Director of Business Development and Operations, would further build and foster relationships with current employers and industry groups;
- The appointment of a Director of WIL in each of the three Schools within the Faculty, in order to establish a leadership team who would play a key role in ensuring that sequential integration and alignment occurs across degree programs;
- The development of appropriate mechanisms and forums for consultation between the Faculty and industry/community as well as appropriate collateral to promote the WIL framework both internally and externally;
- The establishment of clear procedures and systems for the archiving of student work as a means of providing exemplars for future student cohorts as well as for the industry or community sector seeking ideas for creative solutions and/or innovations; and
- An effective system of evaluation of the framework in order to create an ongoing feedback loop that involves the various key stakeholders, including students, industry/employers and educators.

**Conclusion and directions**

This paper essentially reflects the broad theoretical framework and plan for the implementation of WIL within diverse degrees. As part of the work undertaken by the project team, it demonstrates what is potentially a common situation in the tertiary sector. That is, while WIL activity and learning is not new or distinctive, the constructive alignment and sequential development of WIL activities across degrees is arguably less common and also more difficult to achieve in practice.

There are both obvious and necessary avenues for further research, one of the most significant involving a formal review and evaluation of the program once it has been fully implemented and tested. That is, evidence must be obtained from multiple perspectives in order to determine in detail how this WIL framework does in fact lead to more beneficial outcomes for students.
References


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