A strategic approach for building partnerships to enhance graduate employability: driving institutional engagement

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The student experience is enhanced through authentic learning experiences in settings that reflect the workplace. Work Integrated Learning (WIL) supports the provision of authentic learning, in a variety of contexts, within curricular and co-curricular programs, thus facilitating the development of generic skills highly sought after by employers. With increasing accountability measures facing the higher education sector and societal demands that the higher education experience prepare graduates for the dynamic environment of a global workforce, curriculum development and focus requires a paradigm shift.

Curtin University values authentic learning and is committed to developing graduate capabilities through embedding WIL in all courses through scaffolding skill development across curriculum. Established partnerships and flexible arrangements with business, industry and community enable the development of professional practice to be embedded within those contexts, promoting reciprocal and mutually beneficial outcomes. The three-year WIL Strategic Project aims to enhance the employability of Curtin graduates through industry and community relationships; an experiential curriculum; and co-curricular work experience opportunities. This paper will outline the strategies implemented by the project team to achieve the University's ambitious strategic goals; introduce innovative approaches for establishing an institutional framework; and for enhancing the student experience through WIL.

Keywords: Work integrated learning, institutional capacity, sustainability, strategic project

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions are facing a profoundly challenging landscape, arguably the most significant in the history of universities (Thomas, 2012). To respond to the multiple contemporary influences, universities need to reconceptualise teaching and learning approaches and rethink leadership strategies and institutional priorities (Barber, Donnelly & Rizvi, 2013). Despite the notion of universities as creators of knowledge and innovation, they are recognised as highly reluctant to reform (Fullen & Scott, 2009). Work Integrated Learning (WIL) is increasingly recognised as a mechanism for universities to meet the demands of stakeholders such as industry, community, students and government. The student experience is enhanced through authentic learning experiences in settings that reflect the workplace (Ferns, Smith & Russell, 2014; Yorke & Knight, 2004). WIL supports the provision of authentic learning, in a variety of contexts, within curricular and co-curricular programs, thus facilitating the development of generic skills highly sought after by employers. WIL is a contextual-dependent, highly complex and multi-faceted pedagogical approach (Hodges, 2011). Establishing an institutional culture which promotes sustainable partnerships with external stakeholders requires a shift in focus and delivery approaches.

This paper describes a strategic approach to the enactment of a three year project. The overarching aim of the project is to enhance institutional capacity by establishing and implementing a WIL framework for enhancing the student experience through the provision of curricular and co-curricular opportunities to augment employability capabilities in graduates. Strategies encompassed engaging staff, executive management, and the student body. Showcasing best practice and establishing an institutional approach to
WIL were pivotal to initiating university-wide uptake of WIL approaches to teaching and learning.

AUTHENTIC STUDENT EXPERIENCE

The essence of WIL pedagogy is ensuring an authentic and relevant student experience which ultimately enhances the development of employability capabilities and thereby employment outcomes for graduates. Authentic learning experiences are designed to reflect real world scenarios (Shavelson, Klein & Benjamin, 2009). Authentic assessment incorporates students performing real-world tasks that require meaningful application of theoretical concepts in a practical setting (Mueller, 2012). An authentic student experience is fundamental to incorporating a WIL philosophy across an institution.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

This three year WIL Strategic Project aims to enhance the employability of Curtin graduates through a range of approaches. The strategies implemented by the project team to achieve the University's ambitious strategic goals are outlined below. The project was initiated early 2013 with the allocation of targeted strategic funding. The project has been in progress for almost eighteen months, recently surpassing the halfway mark with a proposed completion timeline of December 2015.

The key objectives of the project are:
- Develop a sustainable institutional framework for defining, positioning and evaluating WIL.
- Provide a quality Work Integrated Learning (WIL) student experience that aligns graduate capabilities to meet student, graduate and employer expectations.
- Differentiate Curtin through a systemic and collaborative approach to implementing curricular and co-curricular WIL aligned to industry and community needs.
- Be recognised as leaders in the sector, by employers and in the community in facilitating engagement and partnership opportunities.
- Evidence graduate employability capabilities across the student lifecycle.

The project plan was developed using a phased approach which include:
- Establishing a cohesive WIL team
- Building an institutional framework
- Community and industry engagement
- Staff engagement
- Student engagement
- Dissemination and Collaboration
- Project sustainability.

ESTABLISHING A COHESIVE WIL TEAM

Strategic planning sessions were coordinated which involved the negotiation of a strategic plan that included formulating a vision, mission and strategic goals for the WIL team that aligned to the broader strategic aims of the project. It was imperative that the WIL team were a united entity in order to drive high-level strategic initiatives. Senge, 1994 attests that 'sharing the emerging purpose and destiny of the group shifts a community from a reactive to a creative orientation' (p. 298). The robust discussion and negotiation in which the WIL team partook in articulating the vision and mission, was instrumental in clarifying individual roles, collective imperatives and key performance indicators to evidence project outcomes. With an agreed way forward, the WIL team were poised to determine the shape of the team and reframe position descriptions to ensure individual roles and responsibilities were framed to explicitly address the team vision and mission and ultimately the project key objectives. A clear team identity was established with an agreed vision, mission, and responsibilities of individuals. A symbol was developed that reflected the WIL philosophy and established a recognizable identity for the WIL team.
BUILDING AN INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

WIL Guidelines

The purpose of the WIL Guidelines was to establish a university wide framework for collaborating with industry and community to ensure a quality experience evidenced by authentic assessment. The guidelines are not intended to be a prescriptive policy compliance document. They comprise quality indicators that align to several dimensions. The dimensions include learning design, assessment and moderation of WIL, delivery of WIL programs, community engagement and industry partnerships, and innovation in WIL. Agreeing on the Guidelines facilitated robust discussion across the university ensuring WIL was firmly on the university agenda.

Governance

A WIL Steering Committee and WIL Advisory Group were created to establish a consultative approach to implementing WIL initiatives and facilitate streamlined communication channels. Feedback is sought on project processes and enterprises to inform progress and implementation.

Communication strategies

Communication provides the nexus between drivers of change and the community required to embrace that change. Calculated and deliberate communication channels are pivotal to the dissemination of innovative practices (George et al., 1987). A comprehensive communication plan was developed for the project to ensure clear messages were broadcast to staff and students. The plan comprises four distinct sections: meetings, written and electronic communication, social media and national dissemination. These meetings with formal agendas and minutes provide a conduit to all university personnel. Written and electronic communication includes the regular reporting requirements which are valuable mechanisms for dissemination.

The project team developed some targeted approaches to communication. The Goodwil newsletter is a monthly electronic publication that is sent to both internal and external stakeholders. Figure 2 below shows an example of the front page of the newsletter. Figure 3 displays the home page of the WIL website which the team developed. Both these communication forms are useful for showcasing best practice, sharing opportunities and promoting the progress and innovations driven by the WIL team.
ENGAGEMENT WITH HOST ORGANISATIONS

WIL requires strong partnerships between all partners: students, university staff and host organisations. An effective engagement framework for WIL enables staff at Curtin University to:

- Enrich the teaching, learning and research experience
- Enhance the work-readiness of Curtin graduates
- Build effective business, industry, government and community relationships that support the teaching and learning experience and leads to excellence in research innovation and sustainability
- Foster close and ongoing relationships with Alumni and other graduate networks
- Create and leverage connections to enable the exchange of knowledge and learning
- Become the preferred provider of work ready graduates in our local communities

Most importantly, engagement is multifaceted and takes diverse forms. Engaging with host organisations is a dialogue and engagement activities must be clearly articulated and communicated. It requires a collaborative and coordinated approach and consideration must be given to the context in which the
engagement occurs and how categories differ. The WIL team at Curtin University is committed to engaging with host organisations in a way that facilitates and provides engaging, rewarding and authentic WIL opportunities.

STAFF ENGAGEMENT

Engaging all university staff is essential for embedding WIL practices in the life cycle of the student. The program team adopted several key strategies to address this necessity.

Staff Resources

A chapter on WIL was written for inclusion in the Teaching and Learning Handbook, the key Curtin University resource for teaching staff (Curtin University, 2014). A print version and electronic version are available for staff. Importantly, this publication connects WIL to the broader teaching and learning context at Curtin. To complement the WIL chapter in the Teaching and Learning Handbook, a Foundations of Learning and Teaching (FOLT) module has been developed and is delivered by the WIL team. FOLT is Curtin’s primary professional development for teaching staff - including casual employees – thereby reaching a wide audience.

Authentic Assessment Framework

Tools for engaging staff in reconceptualising curriculum have been developed. The Authentic Assessment Framework (AAF) was developed to determine the authenticity of curricular assessments and learning activities thus ensuring a developmental and student-focused approach. The AAF challenges curricula through providing the graphic evidence of the level of authenticity in the student experience to ensure real-world relevance (Bosco & Ferns, 2014). To provide another avenue for engaging staff and disseminating initiatives, the WIL project team runs a series of events and professional learning opportunities. To date these have included:

- An international webinar titled Engaging diverse students in WIL.
- A monthly community of practice event called Let’s talk about WIL where WIL practitioners are invited to showcase best-practice WIL initiatives.

Staff Recognition

Rewards and staff recognition are central to staff engagement and the perception of the value-add of participation (DeZure (Ed). 2000). Staff competed for funding for WIL in Curriculum initiatives with two projects allocated to each Faculty. The recipients of the funding are currently planning implementation of their initiatives for semester two, 2014. An award for innovative approaches to teaching and learning that incorporate WIL pedagogy is planned for inclusion in the university wide Excellence in Teaching awards. The WIL team is also involved in national and international collaborations and research activities enabling an evidence-based approach and instilling credibility and integrity of the WIL team among staff (Fullen & Scott, 2009).

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Preparation workshops prior to students embarking on a WIL work-placement and de-briefing sessions to ensure students gain optimal outcomes from a work-based experience have been developed and are offered on a regular basis. A WIL Blackboard site provides information for the student body and the opportunity to register for WIL activities. The WIL team offers a series of interactive workshops where students engage in conversations about the culture of the Australian workforce, work-readiness skills, self-reflective practice, and ethical behaviour.
Two WIL units (subjects) have been developed by the WIL team and recently approved: Engaging with Communities 300 and Engaging with Industry 300. These units are designed to provide students with a WIL experience that nurtures employability capabilities and is evidenced by authentic assessment.

COLLABORATION AND DISSEMINATION

The WIL team has intentionally established both internal and external networks to maximise the impact of the project outcomes and ensure impact of deliverables with the added bonus of a vital communication pathway. These collaborations ensure the WIL initiatives are connected to the organisational infrastructure and are embraced holistically.

The WIL team has established strong networks with peak educational bodies focused on WIL and engagement. The WIL team is represented on the Board of Directors for both ACEN and Engagement Australia. These connections ensure the team maintains currency of global developments and provides opportunities to participate in collaborative research and liaise with leaders in the field of WIL. The academic representatives of the WIL team are also actively engaged in research on WIL and industry and community engagement at a national level.

SUSTAINABILITY

The collective impact of all the phases outlined above incorporates the overarching aim to instil sustainable practices across the university. A more targeted initiative was for a representative from the WIL team to reside in each of the Faculties. The intention is that the role of the Faculty representatives will be an ongoing requirement post-project. Ensuring the sustainability of the project deliverables is now a keen focus for the project team as the project transitions into the final stages of implementation for completion in December 2015.

CONCLUSION

This paper has outlined a strategic approach to building institutional capacity to provide an authentic and holistic student experience that embodies WIL pedagogy as an essential component of the teaching and learning philosophy. The multi-pronged, phased approach to driving a cultural shift across the institution highlights the importance of a strong and cohesive project team who share common goals; the establishment of a clear and coherent institutional framework which reflects long term ambitions; the development and enactment of a comprehensive communication plan; the implementation of manifold approaches to staff and student engagement; and creating extensive internal and external collaborations to effectively disseminate outcomes.

REFERENCES


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