Work integrated learning (WIL) courses can be more time consuming and resource intensive to design, teach, administer and support than traditional classroom based courses, as they generally require different approaches to curricula and pedagogy, as well as additional administrative and pastoral responsibilities. Workload and resourcing issues are reported as key challenges to the implementation of WIL, but to date most of the reported evidence on WIL workload is anecdotal. To address this gap in the literature and inform institutional practice, a two-year study was initiated to collect empirical data on the type and amount of work involved in the provision of WIL courses within an Australian university. This paper reports qualitative findings from the first year of the study. An analysis of interview responses from eight academic staff identified three key differences between WIL and classroom based courses: i) the continuous nature of staff workload in WIL; ii) the demands of individual case management of students and partners; and iii) increased administrative responsibilities. Implications for policy and practice are discussed.

Keywords: Administration, qualitative research, teaching, work-integrated learning, workload

INTRODUCTION

Work integrated learning (WIL) courses can be more time consuming and resource intensive to design, teach, administer and support than traditional classroom based courses. WIL generally requires different approaches to curricula and pedagogy, as well as additional administrative and pastoral responsibilities (Bates, 2011). Sourcing, negotiating and maintaining industry/community partnerships, designing and embedding WIL activities in the curriculum, and managing risk are examples of tasks which are either intensified by, or unique to WIL. Workload and resourcing issues are reported as key challenges to the implementation of WIL (e.g., Dickson & Kaider, 2012), but to date most of the reported evidence on WIL workload is anecdotal.

To address this gap in the literature and inform institutional practice, a two-year study was initiated to collect empirical data on the type and amount of work involved in teaching, administering and supporting WIL courses. Workload implications for staff at this university are particularly significant and complex because of the scope and scale of the WIL program that has been implemented at an institutional level. The program incorporates many diverse forms of WIL including inter alia community development projects, service learning, practicums and internships. These activities can be undertaken by students on or off campus, locally, regionally, internationally, as well as virtually.

Following an extensive and participatory research design phase, data collection commenced in 2013. The focus of this paper is qualitative findings from interviews undertaken with staff in the first year of the study. Specifically, participants’ comparisons of WIL and ‘traditional’ classroom based courses are reported.

METHOD

A series of questions were developed for the semi-structured interviews, including one asking participants about their “overall impressions” of the amount of time and sorts of tasks involved in teaching/managing a WIL course vis-à-vis a “regular” course (named ‘units’ at the institution where this research was undertaken). One member of the research team interviewed all participants, usually accompanied by a research assistant, with interviews digitally recorded and professionally transcribed. Eight staff participated in interviews (7 females, 1 male), all of whom were academics teaching across a range of disciplines, multi-disciplinary subjects, modes of delivery and session offerings relating to WIL.

Thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) was used to identify common ideas from the transcripts. Members of the research team first coded transcripts independently then met and discussed identified themes. This was an
iterative process where categories and themes were revised based on group discussions and re-reading of the transcripts. The matrix coding query function in NVivo was used to identify the top 10 coded categories (sub-themes) relating to participants’ comparisons of WIL and traditional courses. This query identifies areas of overlapping text, i.e. where participants draw comparisons, while at the same time referring to particular issues. Frequency measures, including the number of participants who mentioned each coded category and the number of references to each coding category was used as a proxy to signify the importance of ideas. Related categories were then grouped in a hierarchical structure under broader themes (Table 1).

**FINDINGS**

This paper explores three key differences between teaching WIL courses and conventional classroom teaching: i) the continuous nature of staff workload in WIL; ii) the demands of individual case management of students and partners; and iii) increased administrative responsibilities.

**TABLE 1. Themes derived from participants’ comparisons of teaching WIL and classroom based courses**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Continuous workload</td>
<td>Continuous workload</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Overlapping semesters/sessions</td>
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<td>Forward planning</td>
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<td>Time flexibility</td>
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<td>Individual case management</td>
<td>Individual case management</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Student support and supervision</td>
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<tr>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>Administration – general</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other key factors (not discussed in this paper due to word limitations)</td>
<td>Hidden workload</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Workload models not adequately capturing WIL tasks and time</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Student assessment and feedback</td>
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*Continuous Workload*

The first factor differentiating WIL from traditional classroom based teaching is the continuous nature of workload. Participants reported having little or no down time between semesters and during semester breaks, with preparation starting months in advance where placements are identified, students-partners matched and related administration completed. Participants stated that workload was “ongoing”, reducing opportunities for research and/or rest because of the “overlap with… planning for next session and next year”. This was especially the case when organising international placements. One participant observed:

... a normal academic, once you’ve done your exam marking you’ve got that period of time where there’s no students, they’re not going to bother you apart from some grade appeals. But [in conventional courses] you don’t have that responsibility of partners’ matching, advertising for students to fill those roles, interviewing review, it’s basically a recruitment process. (Participant 4)

There was a flexibility aspect of WIL that distinguished it from traditional courses. One academic stated: “[In a traditional unit] I’d know exactly what I was doing. But in fact, I don’t know what I’m doing for the whole of the semester” (Participant 6). This was in response to the requirement to continually adjust course content to match current projects students were working on, or issues they were facing in their WIL activities, which could differ substantially from previous semesters. Greater flexibility was also required when managing students. For example, proactive students often contacted academics before semester started in order to commence their placement early. On the other hand, disengaged students sometimes failed to complete their placements on time, requiring continued management after the semester to complete their placement and/or related assessments. In summary, the boundaries of WIL courses are less well defined than traditional classroom based ones, with workload frequently spilling over into other semesters and reducing the amount of time that staff can spend on other academic activities, including research.

*Individual Case Management*

The ‘individualised’ nature of WIL courses was the second factor differentiating WIL from classroom-based teaching. The management of a diverse array of activities (e.g., placements, project work, volunteering) was
viewed as a key driver of workload, particularly in areas such as assessment, group work, supervision and pastoral care of students. As one participant summarised:

… the nature of the activities are very individual, whereas in a traditional unit you could group students. So you could have 100 students and work on something that would apply to the 100 students. In this case [i.e. WIL] each student is different. Even if they’re working in a group they’re different. (Participant 8)

Managing multiple stakeholders including individual students, groups and partner organisations across a variety of locations (i.e. on and off-campus, virtual environments), was particularly time consuming, especially when issues and problems arose.

… every student is a case. Every organisation is a case. You deal with all those organisations and all those students, which are different people and different activities, different sorts of organisations. Everyone has different issues. (Participant 2)

The workload associated with individual case management was described by one participant as an “additional stress” because she felt “conscious all the time that they [students] had to do good stuff” in order not to “let the clients down” (Participant 7). As discussed below, this increased sense of personal responsibility was raised in relation to a number of other WIL-related issues. A further aspect of individual case management, which appears to differentiate WIL from conventional courses, is the unique attributes and skill set required of staff. In particular, the “ongoing management of students and organisations” via mediation, negotiation and frequent communication requires “good interpersonal skills”, and is a role “not every academic is really suited to.” Similar findings are reported by von Treuer, Keele and Sturre (2012).

Administration

The third key difference mentioned by respondents was the increased administrative workload involved in teaching WIL courses. Most of this additional workload relates to student and partner management, including: developing, maintaining, tracking and evaluating relationships with partner organisations; advising partners on the design of activities that will enable students to achieve the learning outcomes of a particular course; negotiating legal agreements; matching students with appropriate WIL partners and activities; identifying, assessing and monitoring potential work, health and safety, and ethical risks students may be exposed to while on placement; ensuring students engaged in WIL activities involving research are doing so in accordance with relevant research ethics protocols; and handling partner and student inquiries related to insurance, intellectual property rights, administrative processes and the like. As one respondent observed: “it’s a very intensive unit … in terms of administration … I have no doubts this is a very different unit from other units taught at university” (Participant 2).

Another respondent problematised the ‘administrative’ nametag associated with these tasks.

It’s more than administratively too… If you use that term then people think you’re just dealing with paper … [but] you’re not, you’re dealing with people, with the partners and the student. And all of that is key for it to work - and that’s not just administrative, I think it’s more than that. (Participant 8)

This observation alludes to an additional point of difference between WIL and more conventional teaching. Not only are the tasks involved in teaching WIL courses different and more time-intensive, many academics reported feeling an increased sense of personal responsibility for the welfare of students, for the experience of WIL partners, and for the reputation of the University if either of these was compromised during the WIL experience.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

WIL involves pedagogical approaches and a range of activities related to partner and student management that the staff, structures, systems and workload models of universities are not necessarily equipped to handle. This paper has highlighted some of the key differences that academics involved in teaching WIL courses report as distinguishing WIL from more conventional classroom teaching. More broadly, our findings suggest that current faculty workload models do not adequately capture WIL tasks and time, with many participants perceiving that their academic colleagues, including Heads of Department, do not fully appreciate the workload involved in delivering quality WIL.
The lack of institutional recognition of WIL workload is problematic for both policy and practice, as universities across Australia and globally increasingly embrace this form of learning and teaching (e.g., Patrick et al., 2008). Unless workload models and other institutional resourcing mechanisms (e.g., faculty funding models) are cognizant of the different and additional demands of teaching and managing WIL, the quality and sustainability of WIL delivery is at risk. Adjustment of resourcing models, while vital, is not the only available policy and practice response however. Better understanding the key drivers of workload for different types of WIL can also open other avenues for addressing the problem. The wider research project, of which the findings reported here form a part, is seeking to quantify the differentiated nature of WIL workload across diverse delivery modes. It is hoped the results will suggest ways in which the delivery of WIL can be made more efficient and sustainable, while retaining an overriding commitment to effective and equitable practice.

Findings reported here highlight other problematic aspects of WIL workload for staff and universities. Participants consistently reported having little ‘spare’ time for other academic activities, particularly lack of time to undertake research. As well as potentially impacting on job satisfaction and promotion prospects of individual staff, this poses a problem for universities engaged in WIL who aspire to increase their research intensity. ‘Down time’ was another casualty of WIL workloads, indicating the potential for staff burnout. These observations, and the lack of awareness noted above, accord with other reports in the literature that workload associated with WIL is rarely valued, recognised or rewarded at department, faculty or institutional level (Cooper & Orrell 1999; Emslie 2011). These are not insurmountable problems, however. We hope by highlighting these issues our research will contribute to a better understanding of, and development of strategies to address what Cooper and Orrell (1999, p. 2) term the “invisibility” and “marginalisation” of WIL staff, and in so doing improve the sustainability of WIL as an engaged model of learning, teaching and inquiry.

REFERENCES


