Work Integrated Learning and International Students

Research carried out by Deakin University and IDP Education Pty Ltd

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The Study

Australian Research Council funded 3 year linkage project with IDP Education. Overall aim was to investigate issues surrounding the transition to employment for Australian international graduates in areas of skill shortage (engineering, accounting & nursing)

Over 270 interviews with students, university staff, employers, professional bodies and government.

Four elements of the study:

- How universities prepared international students for employment
- Policies that shaped transition
- Recruitment practices of employers
- Longitudinal study of student transition from study to work
Barriers to participation in WIL

**Visa status**
- Visa status and the ambiguous legal status of WIL for international students is a major deterrent.
- Employers use WIL as a form of graduate recruitment (try before you buy). Reluctant to take on international students who may return home.

**English language skills**
- The importance of high level communication skills spanned the 3 disciplines.
- Employers are looking for graduates who have confident command of English and can express their ideas freely in a team environment.
- Graduates need communication skills that can span a range of workplace situations (e.g. shop floor, client meeting, lunchroom, etc.).
- Written communication skills are also highly valued by employers and graduates are need to be able to write confidently and in the appropriate tone and style.
Barriers to participation in WIL (cont)

Soft skills

▶ Employers are looking for students who can demonstrate a range of ‘soft skills’.
▶ All 3 professions emphasise team work, skills and attitude.
▶ Some employers felt that while international students were often hard working and conscientious, they lacked ‘soft skills’.

“We're not looking for who's the best engineer. The degrees have sorted that out to some extent. It's how do they cope in that communication area, the soft skills. How you can be an effective team member with your technical toolbox under your arm”. Human Resources, large engineering firm
Barriers to participation in WIL (cont)

Requirement that students find own placement

- Lack of understanding of Australian job application process
- Limited local networks. Of the 19 engineering students only one completed in Australia.

Student: *That’s a very hard thing, it’s really hard, because I applied for some companies, and I looked at a lot of companies through the internet, and the first thing they tell you is they offer jobs for residents. It’s hard to find a place where they offer a job for international students, like an internship.*

Interviewer: *And has the university given you any support in finding work experience?*

Student: *No, they said job shop and they just show a couple of companies. But no, you’ve got to go and apply for it, and in the end they give priority to the local students.*

*Indian Engineering student*
Strategies to enhance international students’ participation in WIL

Nobody told me about the importance of work experience in this country. They didn’t emphasise that this is what employers would be looking at. And because of that I have wasted too much time because otherwise if somebody had told me look this is what we expect of you not just your scores then I would do more for that. Accounting student, India

- Career education needed from 1st year to raise awareness on the importance of work experience and to allow students to develop a career ‘portfolio’ that includes work experience, volunteering, extra curricular activities, etc.

- Preparation is key to success of WIL for international students. However, big discrepancy in how international students are prepared for placements. Examples of good practice: Youtube video for nurses, intro to clinical practice unit

- Managing expectations of international students (e.g. smaller firms rather than Big 4). Encourage students to think outside the box.
Strategies to enhance international students’ participation in WIL

- Strengthening of Careers and Employment services (links between employers/industry in both home and host countries, visibility/accessibility, services specifically targeting international students - eg Get Noticed program).

- Employers: clarifying & demystifying visa process and educating employers on the benefits of taking on an international student (see Bamboo Ceiling report). There is concern by some in academia and government that the focus on ‘best fit’ may be a proxy for racism.

Yeah, they are very keen to please for obvious reasons. I think they realise that they are lucky to have scored a job with a company here. So they’re very eager to please. They’re generally very quick learners. They’re smart.

Human Resource manager, midsize engineering company
Key Findings

- International students place high value on WIL. See as a way of enhancing employment outcomes in both home and host country (e.g., employers in China also want graduates with practical experience).
- Employers favour graduates who have discipline related work experience.
- International students are failing to think about WIL early enough.
- Employers are often reluctant to take international students on placements.
- There is scope to improve the work readiness of international students.

A Yeah look ideally relevant work experience, so just so what an Australian tax return looks like and financial statements. And even if they did work experience for free with a local accountant or just something to show.

Q So that’s really important?

A I think so, well I just think that shows that they’re keen and they’re willing to work and it also I think they’ll hit the ground running.

CEO, small accounting firm
Thank you