WEBINAR # 2
Responding to Diverse Students in WIL
3 September 2014
Chaired by Sonia Ferns, Curtin University

SUMMARY NOTES

The webinar formed part of the project data collection and was digitally recorded for research purposes with the slide presentation publically available.

102 national and 1 international registrations were received for this event with 53 participants in attendance on the day.

Guest speakers:


2) Cate Gribble (Deakin University) reported on findings from a study examining international student experiences of WIL.

Key themes/issues to arise in relation to financial hardship and WIL:

1) A number of factors create, or contribute to, the financial hardship experienced by social work and health services students, including:
   - Enormous time commitment required to undertake placement/s reduces a student’s capacity to work and earn money to support themselves.
   - Sometimes student quit work altogether and find they cannot return to the job they had prior to the placement.
   - Students may not be earning income while doing a placement, but continue to accumulate debt, which places them in a “double bind”.
   - Additional expenses can be incurred when engaging in WIL i.e., travel, clothing, childcare.
   - Students borrow money to cover costs associated with WIL, adding to their long term HECS debt.
   - Limited capacity to deal with unexpected expenses (i.e., a parking fine).
   - External students can experience additional costs when required to do residential school prior to placement (i.e., travel, accommodation etc).
   - Students drop subjects to cope with the workload and this slows their progression. This can delay their ability to get into full time paid work.

2) Students employ strategies to help plan/manage WIL costs, including:
   - F/T workers accumulate annual leave or long service leave so they can undertake their block placement. This strategy cannot be repeated for the second placement as leave has been used.
   - Work additional hours prior to, or during, WIL to cover the costs.
   - Save money prior to WIL if they know they will not be working during placement.
   - Employ a strict budget.
   - Accumulate credit card debt and/or delay paying bills.
   - Forego things such as food (i.e., 1 meal per day), healthcare needs etc.
   - Apply for scholarships or bursaries, but these are not enough to cover the long term costs associated with WIL.
   - Call on family and friends to provide support. Students report feeling shame associated with this strategy as well as a sense of going into both financial and emotional debt – “how do I pay back the support that has been provided to me?”

3) Financial hardship for students = stress and shame:
   - Stress impacts home life, relationships, work placement itself (i.e., ability to maximise opportunity becomes compromised).
   - Students report feelings of shame about the impact their needs/circumstances have on others.

4) Financial hardship and associated stress has an impact on student learning:
   - Physically and emotionally tired students find it difficult to perform at their best and to make the most of the placement opportunity.
5) **Students are reluctant to ask for help:**
   - Not coping is perceived negatively by students.
   - Students will not ask for help as they believe this may result in a “fail grade” for the placement; could jeopardise their future careers; asking for help places students in the role of “client” vs “professional social worker” – a problem in relation to professional identity formation.
   - Student self-care is a significant problem.

6) **Student suggestions re help/assistance:**
   - Some type of HECS allowance or reverse mortgage type arrangement where students can borrow against their HECS loan.
   - Flexible options include undertaking WIL placements over longer period so students can continue to work.
   - Recognition of prior learning and volunteer work.
   - Reduce number of subjects students have to undertake while on placement.
   - Scholarships need to be better advertised, with a widening of the criteria.
   - Some type of financial compensation for WIL activities.

**Discussion prompts from Mary Kelly – QUT, Equity Director:**

a) **What's the same and what's different about WIL and financial hardship for students:**
   - Universities have a responsibility to ensure all units are accessible and costs associated with undertaking them are reasonable.
   - Difference with WIL is that there are not as many ways in which universities can control the costs which arise for students when engaging with WIL (i.e., travel, clothes, childcare, income foregone).
   - Suggestion is that university bursaries, scholarships, loans etc is the area where universities have some control. More pressure may be placed on universities to provide financial assistance to WIL students.

b) **Federal budget may result in the following outcomes, which need to be thought about in terms of students and the financial challenges many already face:**
   - Cost of degrees may go up.
   - Debt may be increased.
   - Commonwealth “Start Up” and “Relocations” scholarships may be abolished and offered only as loans – this means students from low socio-economic backgrounds may be worse off (by about $3,000) and will be under more financial pressure than they are now.

C) **Universities need to:**
   - Encourage help seeking skills in students, but also make sure that help is available when they ask/need it.
   - Universities need to be ready for these possible changes and the implications they have for students.
Key themes/issues to arise in relation international student experiences of WIL:

1) International students are disappointed with the current WIL opportunities.
   - International students value WIL and want to gain Australian work experience before returning home.

2) Barriers to WIL faced by international students:
   - Visa issues – employers are confused about visa regulations and therefore avoid taking on international students; employers use WIL as part of their recruitment activities and believe international students will return home versus staying in Australia.
   - Employers have high standards regarding all forms of language and communications skills.
   - Employers highly value “soft skills” such as attitude and motivation; soft skills are perceived by employers as difficult to develop; employers are looking for the “X factor” i.e., that something special/extra that a student can bring.
   - Requirement that students their own placement is made difficult for international students due to lack of networks or confidence. Some go home to do a placement or undertake a uni provided project. Both these options are considered unsatisfactory to international students who wanted local experience. (Note – many disciplinary areas want students to find their own placements to help develop job seeking skills etc. It is also thought students will value the opportunity more if they have found it themselves).

3) Strategies to enhance participation in WIL for international students could include:
   - Work experience is undervalued by international until late in their degree, therefore universities need to increase awareness about the importance of WIL starting in first year.
   - Work experience could be scaffolded throughout degree i.e., start in first year with volunteering and move through to final year paid internship.
   - Preparation for placement is essential, including expectations of Australian workplaces.
   - International student expectations need to be managed regarding who they are likely to do placements with i.e., accounting students are unlikely to get a placement with one of the big 4 accounting firms. Need to consider smaller firms as an untapped source of opportunities.
   - Strengthen careers and employment services on campus.
   - Work with employers especially regarding visa issues.

4) The issue of unconscious bias:
   - Employers recruit people who “mirror” their existing staff profile. Employers may be missing opportunities to leverage off diversity of staff and related opportunities in the region.
   - Employer recruitment behaviours are often guided by “best fit” measure, which may in fact be a proxy for racism.

5) Key findings:
   - International students value WIL.
   - Employers favour graduates who have discipline related work experience.
   - International students are failing to think about WIL early enough in their studies.
   - Employers are often reluctant to take on international students.
   - There is scope to improve the work readiness of international students.
   - Challenge for unis in how to meet international student needs in WIL.
Discussion prompts from Dr David Rowbottom (Curtin, WIL coordinator)

a) Universities are under an obligation to international students – so how do we help find placements for them? We are in a leadership role in this space in terms of education industry about the future workforce.

b) Soft skills – how do we embed opportunities for all students from first year all the way through their degree program to develop the sorts of skills employers value?

Open discussion – key points raised:

1) Employers want good grades and soft skills:
   - Large firms want excellent grades plus excellent soft skills. Smaller firms value the degree, but appear more interested in what else the student can bring i.e., experience/skills from extra curricula activities etc.
   - Chinese students report that a highly competitive labour market at home means they must return with both a qualification and work experience. Where will they get this experience if they do not have “soft skills” employers want/value?

2) Cultural competence of staff and employers:
   - Employers are focused on western style leadership and soft skills. Need to revisit what is meant by soft skills and what is valued in these areas. (Recommended reading is the Diversity Council of Australia’s report Cracking the Cultural Ceiling: Future Proofing Your Business in the Asian Century. Go to http://www.dca.org.au/dca-research/cracking-the-cultural-ceiling.html)
   - Tension between what some organisations say they value regarding diversity and their practices i.e., examples of graduate policies which exclude international students.

3) Preparation for international students – what works?
   - Compulsory versus non-compulsory preparatory courses – what do to do get students to engage in support programs?
   - Before students arrive information can be provided about what it is like to work in Australian workplaces.
   - Think about how to present or “package” information – make students see the value to them by engaging.
   - Debriefing after WIL experiences can be used as a strategy can help build resilience in international students (i.e., “Talk Like a Teacher Program” – Charles Darwin Uni).
SUMMARY OF ONLINE CHAT

- **Why don’t students seek help from support services when there are many available on campus?**
  - possibly don’t have time to ask for help.
  - perhaps it is just the expectation that you just have to make it work. If all of their fellow students are doing the same thing, doesn’t make you feel like you are alone in the struggle and just have to push through.
  - maybe the type of services needed are not available, which could be the case for international students. Only helpful if you have access.

- **Type of support/advice students would benefit from:**
  - Financial assistance, which could include help with childcare.
  - Well-being support to help cope with the stress. Information to students on well-being /where to seek help alongside unit guide etc. at the start of their placement unit.
  - More up front information pre-enrolment regarding costs of WIL to students. Need to do the same for the international students.

- **Which are students most affected by cost of WIL?**
  - Disproportionately affects students from low-socio economic background who may not have the same financial back up as other students (e.g. from family)
  - Would like to know how financial burden impacts international students. Are they affected more/same as students from low-socio economic backgrounds? Can those students be separated out in Eleesa’s data?

- **Financial support from unis:**
  - It would be a huge cost to universities to open up financial support to all.
  - WIL is already very expensive for many universities, with organising facilitators etc, and in some cases, paying for placements for students.
  - What about other outside funding sources?

- **Role of partners regarding financial situation of students and source of support:**
  - Is it legal and ethical to require students to work at a job for no pay? Yes, when it’s part of a for credit degree program. For more information visit: [http://www.fairwork.gov.au/Pay/unpaid-work](http://www.fairwork.gov.au/Pay/unpaid-work)
  - Should the employer not be contributing, given the output produced in the workplace? Idea of a minimum wage for students undertaking WIL was raised.
  - In areas where there is competition for placements, asking for students to be paid could cause a lot more problems.
• **Need for flexibility:**
  - Financial challenges maybe exacerbated by university regulations and procedures, sometimes more flexibility could be an answer.
  - Does all WIL need to occur in a workplace? How could “placement” be re-imagined?
  - Perhaps industry-peer mentoring, role plays, simulations and client-based projects are a good alternative for some?
  - The accrediting bodies often don’t accept simulation as sufficient.
  - Simulations are becoming more common, but it’s hard to re-create the experience of an actual workplace. They could only be used in some instances and might require a more blended approach, utilising a range of modes of delivery to make up the required hours.
  - Some unis try offer flexibility with placement model i.e., in addition to full-time internship, also offer 1 day per week so students can manage other work, family commitments etc. BUT there are challenges with this approach, i.e., lose continuity of care and learning; lack of flow.
  - Need to also consider what is done in “class” to consolidate learning – may open up opportunities.
  - 1 day per week might work better on client based projects or for smaller clinic blocks.

• **What impact do these significant pressures have on quality/ continuity of learning?**

• **Model of HE is outdated. Students generally cannot dedicate a full-time load to study. Do we need to spread the study load out over a greater period of the year?**
  - Trimester model as the norm.
  - Spreading out the load sounds good, but probably also requires much more flexibility in a number of areas to accommodate student and employer needs.
  - Range of options may be required as International students often go home over the summer to see family (good for their wellbeing) and other students use summer to work to fund upcoming study periods.

• **International students:**
  - What are their specific financial and support needs? Need to keep in mind that they are already paying a lot to study, WIL adds to it.
  - Finding their own placement is a challenge for international students (i.e., no networks). Uni may need to offer additional support when this is what is expected, could come via Uni Careers Services if able/prepared to get involved.
  - 'Best fit' / racism proxy - have found this in research at MQ.
  - Partners sometimes “pushback” regarding international students. When persuaded to take these students, the businesses often find the students are smart, adaptable and highly motivated.
  - WIL as a recruitment strategy is a barrier to taking some students. Need to support employer understanding of post study work visa, so more willing to take international students.
  - Resource from Joanne Tyler (resource for international Chinese students on how to make the most of their study time in Australia)
How could the professional/accrediting body help address some of these challenges?

Issue of professional development for staff around cultural competence:
- Valuing diversity is not cultural competence.
- Need to be able to "sell" diverse students much better. Or perhaps better selection of businesses to place such students in - somewhere where their difference is a benefit.
- Hofstede's six dimensions may be of use for seeking cultural awareness. See geert-hofstede.com/dimensions.html

All students would benefit from the development of their “soft skills”.
- Confidence can be built for students through developing good communication skills.
- International students develop soft skills within context of courses and in conjunction with local students.
- Need to build student resilience – part of this will occur through preparation of students (throughout placement), clarity around expectations etc.
- soft skills include intrinsic personal characteristics that all students, including international students, bring with them to the work environment.

On-line version of the "Student Practice Evaluation Form" system at UQ for occupational therapy students: http://blog.tomw.net.au/2012/10/online-support-for-evaluating.html