**Stories from the field...**

**CoPs and their use for building staff capacity for inclusive WIL**

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<th>University/Institution: RMIT</th>
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<td>Name/title of example of inclusive WIL practice: Communities of Practice (CoP) and their use for building staff capacity for inclusive WIL</td>
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<td>Key contact: Leoni Russell</td>
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<td>Key Words: Community of Practice; sharing; learning; networks; WIL champions</td>
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**General information:**

RMIT have been running their WIL CoP since early 2013. The WIL CoP is made up of people from across the institution, including: academics, placement coordinators, Vocational Education Teachers (VET), student services professionals and operational staff. Sometimes the WIL CoP is dominated by a particular group of people within the university, and this can be due to the topics being covered in meetings, the time of year or whether the university is implementing a new initiative. For example, the roll out of the WIL Inplace system meant operational matters dominated meetings at one point and attendees were mainly user of the system.

The WIL CoP meets every 6 weeks for about 90 minutes, although the room is booked for 2 hours to allow people to stay back and continue chatting after the session has formally ended. The group meets face to face in a pre-booked meeting room, but occasionally virtual sessions occur to allow staff from satellite campuses such as Vietnam to contribute to the discussion.

The group facilitators, Natalie Colton (WIL Advisor) and Leoni Russell (Senior Advisor, Learning and Teaching), invite members to contribute suggestions to the calendar of topics to be covered and ask people to get involved as presenters. This approach helps members build a sense of ownership for the WIL CoP and ensures the topics covered serve their interests. The topics for meetings generally alternate between operational matters and issues related to learning and teaching.

Meetings have a key focus and involve a range of speakers from across the University, as well as students and external organisations such as the Fair Work Ombudsman. Time for questions and answers is built into the agenda, which is seen as crucial to the WIL CoP’s purpose and success.

**Building staff capacity:**

The main purpose of the WIL CoP at RMIT is to provide staff with an opportunity to share and learn from one another. The groups’ focus on a range of both operational and learning and teaching WIL issues helps build the professional capacity of staff, particularly in relation to matters which are challenging or difficult. The group also helps those who may be “working alone” to grow a network they can call on for support and advice.

The WIL CoP is also an opportunity to provide staff with access to the latest resources and information on matters related to WIL, including those related to issues of access, equity and inclusive practice. Guest speakers from departments such as the Disability Liaison Services, Legal Services Group and Internal Audit and Risk Management etc. come along from time to time to provide expert advice and up to date information on a topic and to answer questions in a group environment.
Resources are also shared across the group, as are stories about how particular challenges or issues are currently addressed, as well as alternative approaches and sharing good practice stories.

Based on WIL CoP discussions, Natalie identifies issues that need looking into further and provides updates and solutions to the group. As part of this process, it also allows the community to identify resources to be developed. Examples include promotional brochures for industry partners, guidelines and manuals for workplace supervisors, templates and checklists for staff to use.

“Inclusive” successes:
The RMIT WIL CoP has dedicated meetings to showcase models and approaches to WIL that can help improve access for students who sometimes find it difficult to gain a placement, such as international students and those with a disability. Exploring ways to increase the number of WIL opportunities available on campus at RMIT was a recent topic and involved all stakeholders talking about their experiences, including students.

Sharing stories related to inclusive WIL practices within the WIL CoP means there is a vehicle for building staff awareness, knowledge and capacity in this area – and for issues of access and equity in WIL to gain exposure. Since its inception, the WIL CoP has gained good traction across the institution. Approximately 70-80 members participate via Google Plus, as well as 30-40 regular attendees to WIL CoP meetings. Staff’s “inclusive” capacity is built upon with the sharing of relevant institutional guidelines and procedures, and the running of additional professional development sessions by dedicated WIL learning and teaching staff.

Note - the on-going success of the WIL CoP in general relies in part on its communication strategy, developed by a group of RMIT WIL media and communications students in supporting the design and ongoing communications via a WIL Skills google + community. The strategy and online communication space helps the group stay connected and includes: inviting students to WIL CoP meetings to share their stories; circulation of a WIL & Employability newsletter: the use of Google Plus to share resources, chat and advertise events etc.

Room for improvement:
There is a temptation to have a WIL CoP meeting dominated by too many presenters, thereby reducing the amount of time available for questions and answers and sharing best practice. The group facilitators work to ensure there is a balance between presenters and discussion time.

Strategies to improve greater engagement from academics in the pedagogical discussions around WIL is an area in need of some more attention.

Advice for those looking to start a WIL CoP:
Based on her experiences at RMIT, Leoni Russell suggests the following to those interested in starting a WIL CoP:

1) Determine the purpose of your WIL CoP and establish some guidelines for how it will run. These should be revisited at the commencement of each year.
2) Members of the WIL CoP need to drive the agenda, the topics to cover and contribute as presenters.
3) Identify WIL champions from across your institution and get them involved.
4) Develop a communication strategy and stay in touch.
5) Share stories – good and challenging.