Stories from the field...

Supply Chain Management Students

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<th>University/Institution: Curtin</th>
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<td>Name/title of example of inclusive WIL practice: Early Work Integrated Learning (WIL) experience in a business course; inclusion as an on-site assignment.</td>
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<td>Key contact: Associate Professor Paul Alexander and Dr Trish Dooey</td>
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<td>Key Words: WIL in curriculum; business; inclusive practice; equity; building staff capacity</td>
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General information:
Students are in the second year of their business degree and taking the core business unit, Supply Chain Management. Associate Professor Paul Alexander and Dr Trish Dooey who developed the project, wanted business students to experience an authentic supply chain management placement early on in their course, so that students have a real work reference point for building on learning in the classroom and developing industry relevant skills. The WIL experience is realised as a WIL assignment within the unit and sees students working with a real client on a discrete supply chain management project. Host organisations include reputable and well-known brands such as Miss Maud, Bunnings, Air BP and Goldstar Transport. For many companies access to quality students and the chance to input to what they learn is a perceived advantage – they see it as their social responsibility to contribute to the future education of their workforces. Working in small groups and acting in the capacity of consultants, students must approach a business and arrange to undertake a site visit to explore supply chain processes. Working in a team they then prepare a report based on this visit, and subsequent interactions with the businesses’ representatives, highlighting potential improved processes.

Building staff capacity:
Student feedback on WIL experiences has allowed us to modify the WIL assignment and the WIL placement requirements. These modifications will include improved materials and resources to help prepare students for engaging in professional communication with clients and changes in assignment scope that improve practicality of placing students into client businesses.

“Inclusive” successes:
Both students and client businesses enjoyed the participation in the WIL assignment. Sourcing placements for students with willing industry partners and employers is time consuming and requires commitment from all participants to ensure the success of the program. Creating clear objectives, roles and responsibilities ensured that partners and students understood what was expected of them in the WIL project and helped minimise time and resource pressures on partners.
Additionally, student output, such as the generation of a professional report for clients helped raise the profile of Curtin students with partners and provided ‘evidence’ of the value of hosting students in a WIL project. Students enjoyed the work experience, and this was enhanced because it was a) early in their course, and b) limited to an assignment, which allowed them to feel less pressured by the placement. Students were able to explore industry relevant processes and professional networks liaising with real clients and partner organisations could contribute to future workforce skills development and identify potential future employees.

**Room for improvement:**
As this was a pilot program of a WIL in curriculum experience a number of areas have been identified for improvement. In particular support material for the WIL assignment was developed on an ad hoc basis and in response to students needs at the time of placements. These resources can now be revisited and developed in a more considered manner and in line with learning objectives. Preparing students for a professional environment and for working with real clients was also identified as an area for improvement. Resources and clear expectations around professional communications, meeting deadlines and keeping appointments will have to be developed for future WIL placement in supply chain management. Although students were prepared for this in specialised introductory sessions prior to the placement in the pilot program, more work needs to be done to improve professional communications standards and prepare students. It has also been noted that providing multiple student groups to one company was too onerous on the company and meant they had to replicate processes and meetings with student groups. And finally, there needs to be improved processes around sourcing partners to work with and provide WIL experience for students. With limited resources, staff and time this role is challenging and requires a more strategic and systematic approach, with more internal support.

**Advice for those looking to facilitate an inclusive experience:**
For those preparing to facilitate an inclusive WIL experience sufficient time must be allowed for sourcing reputable partners and in preparing students for the WIL experience. Students also do not necessarily have any experience working in a professional environment and most benefit from learning the basics of communicating in a professional environment, including how to write emails, make phone calls and initiate and follow up meetings. Learning objectives must be clearly identified and resources developed should scaffold and support learning in the WIL experience. In this pilot project significant resources were required and the University facilitator took on a considerable load developing resources for students, sourcing partnerships, liaising with partners and supporting students through the experience. It is noted that an early WIL experience (in second year) is a very valuable yard stick for students/university staff and partner organisations to contribute to student learning and future workforce skills development. The experience can also build valuable bonds between host businesses and the university. For early-course WIL experiences, students should not expect WIL placements to convert to jobs (though this may occur for late-course WIL experiences). Host companies should not expect ground-breaking work to be done by students, they must enter the program as an industry contribution to student education.