

## CARRICK INSTITUTE : DISCIPLINE BASED INITIATIVES



Work Integrated Learning : A national framework for initiatives to support best practice

### Queensland University of Technology

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<b>Vignette title and details</b>	<b>Work-integrated learning in Health</b> Undergraduate Whole-of-course approach
<b>Discipline</b>	Multiple health disciplines including exercise and sport science, nursing, optometry, paramedic practice, podiatry, nutrition and dietetics, and social work
<b>Employment sector</b>	Health
<b>Student numbers</b>	Approximately 3000 students per year
<b>Optional/compulsory</b>	Work-integrated learning is a required component of a number of our undergraduate courses. As such, it is compulsory for those students.
<b>Credit bearing</b>	It is credit bearing within their degree courses
<b>Assessment</b>	According to the requirements of the various discipline groups and/or registering bodies, students' performance is assessed in the workplace settings where their off-campus practicums are undertaken. Although there are variations, the integration of national competency sets into the assessment methodology is may be required. Self assessment by students is also part of the assessment process.
<b>Payment</b>	On the whole, there is no payment to students for the work integrated learning tasks that they undertake during their practicums. An exception relates to paramedic students undertaking their final internship unit who receive payment from the industry partner.
<b>Number of staff involved</b>	In general, there is an academic Clinical Co-ordinator / Work-integrated Learning Director (or equivalent) in each school. For courses with smaller cohorts, this role may be integrated with that of the course co-ordinator. Academic staff who undertake these roles are supported by administration staff. In the case of nursing, the number of staff supporting students in the workplace setting is substantial and basically is a combination of staff employed by QUT on a sessional basis and staff seconded from health care facilities for the duration of the practicums.
<b>Key Words</b>	Practicum; curriculum; work-integrated learning; health

## Overview

For more than 30 years the Faculty of Health at QUT has been providing work-integrated learning for undergraduate students. Over that time the number of courses and students involved in work-integrated learning has increased substantially. Currently, our courses meet the needs of initial professional preparation in disciplines as diverse as human movement studies, nursing, nutrition and dietetics, optometry, paramedic practice, podiatry and social work. As the nexus between professional practice and education, work-integrated learning plays a crucial role in preparing our students for their roles as beginning practitioners in their chosen careers. As such, it is an essential component of these courses and is undertaken by all students as part of their overall course experience. The Faculty of Health now places more than 3000 students per year in work-integrated learning situations, or 'pracs', as they are commonly referred to by students. Whilst individual courses vary in the way that 'prac' is integrated within their three-year and four-year course structures, students generally undertake sequenced practicums that commence in first, second or third year and continue to build in length and complexity through to the final semester.

## Structure of program

As for many other disciplines, our undergraduate courses operate within not only the university context but also diverse professional contexts. The accreditation of our courses by the respective professional bodies is essential for graduates' entry to practice and / or registration or licensure as fully qualified professionals. Achieving and maintaining accreditation carries a number of requirements not the least of which surrounds meeting the profession's expectations regarding graduate 'fitness-to-practice'. At the same time, our students also have high expectations about 'going on prac'. The opportunity to work with patients and health professionals, and put theory into action within real-life situations enables them to make sense of what they are learning. However, in managing student placements across hundreds of clinical settings, the achievement of quality learning experiences that meet these aspirations presents significant challenges.

Because work-integrated learning has long been a traditional inclusion within the fabric of health courses, we have been working on the refinement of our practices and processes for a substantial period of time. Over that time one of our biggest challenges has been the increasing student numbers, particularly in nursing, and the associated need to not only secure suitable placements for students but also support both students and workplace supervisors to facilitate quality learning outcomes. The relationships that we have built with external partners in the health industry continue to be pivotal to the success of our work-integrated learning program. Such relationships make it possible for us to provide a variety of quality placements for students throughout the major cities, rural and remote areas of Queensland.

## Special features

Perhaps our greatest achievement to date is the development of our 'Bridging the Gap' initiative which features two complementary strategies - '*Workplace into the Uni*' and '*Uni into the Workplace*'. This initiative utilises a coherent set of web-based programs that assist students to integrate theory and practice, and to enhance the development of knowledge and skills needed for contemporary health care. It also supports students' clinical learning across health disciplines and facilitates a reciprocal learning relationship between two complementary learning environments: the university and the workplace. Whilst the programs are contextualised to meet the needs of particular disciplines, the initiative is founded on a common set of generic principles that provide coherence and direction to the learning activities. As a whole the BTG initiative provides an innovative and flexible strategy to prepare students to enter the clinical practicum experience with confidence and support.

*Workplace into the Uni* is based on a suite of scenario-based programs that feature the online delivery of authentic patient scenarios for nursing, paramedic, podiatry and multidisciplinary student groups. The main objective of these programs is to facilitate development of skills that underpin the application of theory to practice, in particular problem solving, critical thinking and reflective practice skills. The four main programs – the Clinical Decision Making (CDM), Medication Administration (*MedAdmin*), *WoundCare* and Multidisciplinary programs – all contain clinical scenarios which are embedded across the first, second, third and fourth years of the respective courses. The scenario suite is based on 'real world' cases/situations similar to those that students might expect to encounter in clinical practice. The online environment allows us to realistically present students with important but difficult, challenging and even potentially life-threatening situations that they may or may not encounter during their clinical practicums. The scenarios are based on generic principles of clinical decision-making, but are contextualised within each of the specific health disciplines. They have been developed in collaboration with industry partners and clinical practitioners, as well as health consumers. Importantly, the scenarios are also

informed by the growing body of knowledge that we have gained through student interaction, the evaluations that we have systematically conducted over the past four years, and our reflection on these results and students' learning outcomes.

*Uni into the Workplace* features our Work Integrated Learning (WIL) website which provides 24/7 access for students and workplace supervisors to a variety of purpose-built, online programs that are designed both to support students' learning in the clinical setting and to maintain a connectedness between their on-campus and off-campus experiences. The basic objectives of the WIL site are to assist students and workplace supervisors with understanding the requirements of students' learning in the workplace and to promote the achievement of quality learning outcomes within the practice environment. Regardless of where their placement is located students (and their workplace supervisors) are able to access up-to-the-minute information for students and supervisors, a variety of online practicum tools such as virtual workplace orientations, skills development vignettes and reflective practice resources that are linked to the QUT Student Portfolio. The QUT Student Portfolio is a university-wide, online tool designed to enhance the learning process and assist students with the transition from university to graduate employment. It provides an environment in which students can document and present different aspects of their academic, professional and personal development.

## Future work

One of our priorities over the next 5 years will be the further development of our relationships with key industry partners. Like many other areas, health care is an extremely dynamic field and presents an increasingly challenging environment for the provision of work-integrated learning programs. We need to work with our key partners to continually reconsider their needs and aspirations in order to progress the further development of our relationships in mutually beneficial ways.

Another area for further work is the development of forward-looking strategies to improve upon the support that we currently provide for students going on 'prac' and for the staff who work with them in the workplace environment. Issues surrounding shortages of skilled staff and the increasingly fluid nature of staffing profiles within health care facilities pose important challenges in terms of maintaining the quality of students' experience, the assessment of their performance and achievement of expected learning outcomes.

Future work will also be focusing on developing closer links between work integrated learning and the QUT Student Portfolio particularly from the perspective of students' reflecting on their learning and recording their reflections against discipline-specific competency frameworks and/or the QUT Graduate Capabilities.