Maximising the Benefit of Your Work Integrated Learning Experience:

A Guide for Students

Work integrated learning (WIL) is the term universities use to describe any activity that lets students practice what they learn at university in a professional setting. It's different from work experience you might organise yourself, because it forms part of a purposefully designed curriculum to ensure the experience contributes to your learning and development. Put simply, it's the integration of work with learning.

There are so many advantages for students who engage in WIL whilst at university. Students report that WIL makes them more employable and attractive to potential employers, and employers back this up, reporting WIL favourably influences their perception of student's abilities[1]. Students also report WIL helps them assess their career direction, complements their learning, increases their networks, increases their motivation to study and helps them prepare for future employment[1].

Now newer models for work integrated learning are emerging that include, micro placements (2 days to a few weeks), online projects or placements, engagement with events, hackathons, or competitions, students undertaking consulting activities for industry partners and student engagement with start-ups or incubators.

Benefits

These new and innovative models of WIL have the same benefits as the more traditional models, however they also have added benefits for students that include:
- Working with industry and community partners in a way that encourages getting to know each other and facilitates the development of authentic working relationships.
- Working with a team of student you may not otherwise interact with – from different disciplines, different universities, different cultures and even different countries.
- Working with all the different stakeholders on a project that everyone is passionate about and motivated to achieve together.
- Challenging students to move out of their comfort zone, try something new, challenge themselves professionally and personally and finish the experience with a real sense of accomplishment.
- Being challenged to think outside the box and find innovative solutions to real world problems.
- Gaining a competitive edge through evidence of up-to-date, real world capabilities relevant to industry and community partners.

Strategies for Success

It is important to get the most out of your WIL experience. When asked how best to prepare for a WIL opportunity, industry and community partners, university staff and students who have successfully completed a WIL experience made the following suggestions:

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[1] Patrick, C. Peach, D. & Pocknee, C. (2009) The WIL (Work Integrated Learning) report: A national scoping study, Australian Teaching and Learning Council

- **Appreciating your project context:** do your background research before you begin. Review the industry or community partners website, review individuals LinkedIn profiles, and read all relevant information provided to you regarding the WIL opportunity.
- **Value what others bring:** embrace the diverse perspectives that different stakeholders bring. Having diverse perspectives is important and will benefit the work. Remember diversity brings opportunity.
- **Be open to new opportunities and ways of working:** innovative models of WIL are designed to encourage students to experience new ways of working; embrace the learning and try something new.
- **Be clear about roles, responsible and expectations:** it's important to identify, before you commence your WIL opportunity, who you are collaborating with and who are you reporting to. Who are the stakeholders and what they are hoping to achieve through the WIL.
- **Clarify purpose and scope:** once you have identified the expectations of all stakeholders, it's important to clarify the purpose, scope and deliverables of the project you are working on. Referring to this throughout the WIL experience will make sure your team stays on track.
- **Listen and communicate regularly:** work with the different stakeholders to establish clear communication strategies, timelines and modes of communication (e.g. face to face, online conferencing, email, SMS). Negotiate these early and check these communication strategies are effective for each stakeholder group throughout the project.
- **Be proactive:** grab opportunities and take initiative to collaboratively work through challenges.
- **Manage time complexity and ambiguity:** innovative WIL activities often occur across short time frames so employ project management strategies and tools to help achieve the best outcomes. Don't be afraid to proactively seek advice and support from experts and stakeholders to manage changes in scope, timelines and deliverables. Time pressures are designed to be achievable but challenging, and often cause stresses. Be mindful of time constraints and work with these instead of against them.
- **Be ready to pivot:** be ready to adapt to unforeseen changes. It's all part of the process and managing change is a key skill to practice and demonstrate in today's world.
- **Evidencing your capabilities to others:** plan for how you are going to capture your emerging capabilities and reflect on any gaps.
- **Manage intellectual property and information of contributors and industry:** arrangements regarding intellectual property, use of non-disclosure agreements, and insurance will be arranged prior to commencement of the WIL activity by the university and industry and community partners. This information should be provided to you before the WIL begins. Make sure you read this information and agree with it prior to commencing any WIL opportunity

Reflecting on your WIL experience

Reflect regularly throughout your WIL experience, not just at the end. Being self-aware of your time management, task completion and professional standards will assist you in identifying any gaps in skills, knowledge and abilities.