

## Editorial Introduction

Although the pedagogic benefits of work-integrated learning (WIL) are well-documented, some participants experience significant stress and financial hardship due to the unpaid and intensive nature of work placements. Financial hardship is a known contributor to elevated stress and anxiety, which can negatively impact student wellbeing and ultimately lead to inequitable learning outcomes and increased risk of noncompletion. Low levels of financial self-efficacy can exacerbate financial stress, compounding the barriers to successful WIL placements for these students. This briefing paper contributes to understandings of 'WIL wellbeing' by exploring the interplay between financial self-efficacy, financial stress, student wellbeing and placement performance.

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## The impact of financial stress and hardship on work-integrated learning wellbeing

Deanna Grant-Smith and Laura de Zwaan

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is an educational approach that combines academic instruction with practical workplace experiences to equip students with relevant skills and knowledge in a real-world setting. Work-based placements are a mandatory requirement of many degrees and are widely promoted by universities, professional accreditation bodies and graduate recruiters as a mechanism for demonstrating work readiness and employability. Participation in placements requires being present at a workplace, either physically or through virtual means, for an extended duration to gain firsthand experience in the professional environment. While the duration of placements may vary, certain programs mandate over 1000 hours of on-site experience. Despite the majority of placements being unpaid, they are still perceived to be of universal benefit to participants, with the potential negative impacts on participants' social, psychological and financial wellbeing traditionally receiving little attention (Grant-Smith et al., 2017).

Recent research has shown the significant financial stress that can result from participation in a WIL placement (Grant-Smith & de Zwaan, 2019; Johnstone et al., 2016; Morley et al., 2023). Extended unpaid work placements have particularly pronounced financial impacts on students who are financially independent, especially those relying on paid employment as their primary source of income, as this work typically is forgone while undertaking placements (Grant-Smith & de Zwaan, 2019). Students' financial circumstances and concerns about finances also have the potential to impact their general wellbeing as those who encounter financial difficulties may experience greater levels of stress and negative emotions which can impact their mental health (Heckman et al., 2014, Jessop et al., 2005). The financial hardship experienced during placement is a known cause of stress (Ross et al., 1999), anxiety (Archuleta et al., 2013) and attrition (Schofield et al., 2009), and can negatively impact participant's placement experiences and performance (Grant-Smith & Gillett-Swan, 2017), leading to inequitable outcomes and higher levels of general stress.

To understand how WIL placements can impact student wellbeing across the dimensions of financial wellbeing and general wellbeing, we surveyed 364 students undertaking a degree involving a mandatory or elective WIL placement in research funded by the Australian Collaborative Education Network. Of these 162 had recently participated in a WIL placement as part of their degree. We were interested in understanding how experiences of general and financial stress contributed to their wellbeing during WIL placements.

## General Stress in WIL Placements

As a result of the success of the widening participation agenda, the student profile in Australian higher education is changing. The profile of current students is getting older (ABS, 2022) and it is no longer dominated by students attending full-time straight out of high school. Even those enrolled in a full-time load are increasingly likely to be undertaking three or fewer subjects each semester in lieu of the traditional four. This means there are more students who have a range of caring and other responsibilities that need to be accommodated while studying (Creedon, 2015). The intensive nature of WIL over extended time periods can therefore negatively impact other life domains. The attitudes and behaviours of supervisors, co-workers and clients within the WIL workplace can also have a significant impact on student wellbeing. The impact of the WIL placement environment, particularly in relation to student dignity (Davis, 2020), perceptions of work performance and value (Koopmans et al., 2013) and treatment by others in the WIL workplace (Rees & Monrouxe, 2011) all influence the levels of general stress experienced by participants.

We asked students a range of questions relating to their WIL experience and asked them to rate the extent to which they felt stressed about the placement in general. Unsurprisingly, in our sample, the presence of caring and supportive actions, receiving appropriate or helpful feedback, and feelings of inclusion and fair and equal treatment were all associated with experiences of low general stress. By contrast, although the numbers of students experiencing verbal abuse, physical abuse and sexual discrimination/harassment were low in our sample, all were associated with high levels of general stress. Experiencing status-related abuse such as being ignored, being excluded, asked questions in intimidating ways, and being given unpleasant tasks resulted in higher levels of general stress. Other negative workplace experiences which were associated with high general stress included witnessing the abuse of others and feeling exploited.

General WIL stressors	WIL experiences associated with lower levels of general stress
	Feeling able to fulfill responsibilities
	Positive collaboration with others
	Ability to perform placement work well with minimal time and effort
	Taking on challenging work tasks
	Experiencing caring, supportive, and respectful interactions
	Feeling included
	Experiencing fair and equal treatment
	WIL experiences associated with higher levels of general stress
	WIL placement work tasks taking longer than intended
Experiencing status-related abuse	
Experiencing verbal or physical abuse	
Experiencing sexual discrimination or harassment	
Witnessing the abuse of others	
Feeling exploited	

Lower levels of stress appear to be positively related to self-efficacy with students who reported being able to fulfil their responsibilities and collaborate effectively with others also reporting lower levels of general stress. Although being able to perform their WIL placement well with minimal time and effort is also associated with lower general stress, this does not mean that students seek an 'easy ride', as taking on challenging tasks when available is also associated with low stress.

## Causes of Financial Stress in WIL Placements

Financial stress may be experienced as specific or repeated instances of financial concern, financial hardship or a continuation of endemic poverty. Financial concerns include objective factors relating to the actual availability and use of resources and subjective factors which reflect students' perceptions of their financial stability or volatility (Nora et al., 2006). We asked students to rate their financial circumstances at various times during the academic year using Andrews and Chong's (2011) subjective self-report measures to assess their financial stress. Students classed themselves as either *financially secure* and able to pay for what they want, *financially adequate* and able to pay for necessities but not much else, or *financially struggling* to pay for necessities.

The results in Figure 1 show that although there is some decline in financial circumstances during semester relative to outside of semester periods, the impact of WIL participation on financial circumstances is significant. The percentage of students who classify their financial circumstances as struggling to pay for necessities rising from 15% during the semester to 48% during placement. There is also a significant decrease in the percent of students who classify themselves as financially secure.

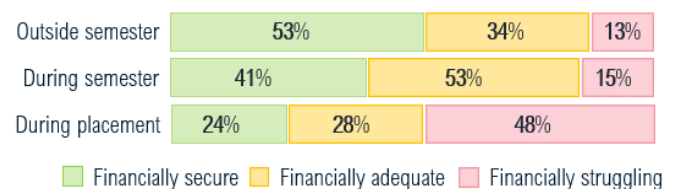


Figure 1. Self-reported financial circumstances

In addition to assessing their financial circumstances, we asked students to rate the extent to which the placement was stressful due to financial issues. Predictably, the results show that financially struggling during normal study periods or during placement is associated with high financial stress during placement. We also found that higher levels of financial stress were associated with going into debt to fund placement participation and some students deferring studies.

Higher levels of financial stress were experienced by students who had to fund additional costs associated with WIL participation including accommodation, food or supplies, while those who did not incur additional costs reported lower financial stress. We found many students experiencing higher levels of financial stress were funding participation through financial support from others including family, friends or government sources, as well as through strategies such as funding participation through savings, changing spending patterns or using buy-now-pay-later debt.

WIL financial stressors	WIL experiences associated with lower levels of financial stress
	Higher levels of financial self-efficacy
	Not incurring additional costs due to placement
	Not requiring financial support from others
	Appropriate learning opportunities
	Fair and equal treatment
	WIL experiences associated with higher levels of financial stress
	Placement is mandatory, not elective
	Financially struggling during normal study periods or during placement
	Going into debt to fund placement participation
Incurring additional costs due to placement	
Seeking financial support from others to fund placement participation	
Feeling exploited	
Earning less money from paid employment	
Losing paid employment	

As would be expected, not requiring additional funding to participate in WIL is linked with lower financial stress. Students who felt they were engaged in appropriate learning opportunities and receiving equitable treatment also reported lower levels of financial stress. Conversely, experiencing a sense of exploitation, earning a lower income or losing paid employment due to WIL participation were linked to elevated financial stress. Moreover, possessing greater financial self-efficacy was associated with reduced levels of financial stress.

### Managing risks to WIL wellbeing

General and financial stressors do not act in isolation; instead, they have compounding effects on wellbeing. WIL experiences which expose participants to low levels of general and financial stress contribute to excellent WIL wellbeing outcomes. By contrast, WIL experiences which expose participants to high levels of general or financial stress can result in poorer wellbeing outcomes. The impacts of poor WIL wellbeing created by high levels of financial and general stress can be significant for students. In our sample we found that students who experienced high levels of both financial and general stress were also more likely to neglect their academic work or withdraw from their studies. There are significant institutional and disciplinary differences in how work placements are planned, organised and monitored. However, the fundamental principle guiding WIL must be safeguarding the wellbeing of participants. The emphasis of any WIL placement program must be on providing quality learning opportunities while minimising foreseeable negative impacts of participation on students.

As shown in Figure 2, conceiving of WIL wellbeing as comprised of financial and general dimensions allows for potential stressors and risks to wellbeing to be identified and managed.

We propose a risk management system built on these dimensions that can be likened to a traffic light, employing different colours to denote varying levels of risk: red, signifying a high level of risk to student wellbeing and potentially harmful situation; green, indicating a low level of risk to student wellbeing and favourable wellbeing outcome; and amber, acting as a cautionary signal, advising prudent consideration due to a moderate level of risk to student wellbeing.

Under this approach 'green' WIL programs that deliver excellent wellbeing are likely to have high levels of financial, academic, and other support. By contrast, programs which expose participants to potential general and financial stress would receive an amber light flagging the need for review due to the potential detrimental impact on some aspect of participant wellbeing. Finally, programs that lead to elevated levels of both general and financial stress are prone to yield unfavourable WIL wellbeing outcomes, warranting a red light. Based on our findings these are likely to be mandatory unpaid placements of extended length which involve additional costs and take place in workplaces with poor supervision.

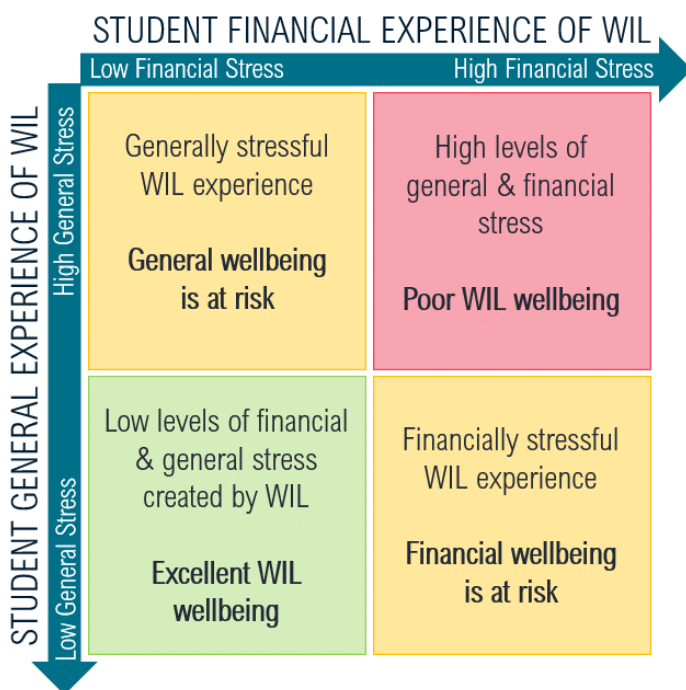


Figure 2: Dimensions of WIL wellbeing

### Safeguarding WIL wellbeing

The TEQA Guidance Note on WIL (2022) emphasises the importance of “positive WIL experiences” (p. 2) and the obligation on institutions to take “effective steps to monitor and support the wellbeing and safety of students engaged in WIL” (p. 3.). Students participating in placements are exposed to a range of general and financial stress which can negatively impact their learning and wellbeing.



Acting on assessments of these stressors will require significant commitment and resourcing of support programs ranging from financial support to the training and vetting of potential WIL workplaces and supervisors, screening the (ongoing) suitability of potential WIL workplaces, educating students about their rights and responsibilities and providing appropriate complaints mechanisms. It could also lead to the adoption of alternatives to extended periods of unpaid work experience to limit negative outcomes on WIL wellbeing such as simulations, case-based learning and service learning models or the introduction of payment for placements (de Zwaan & Grant-Smith, 2022; Grant-Smith et al., 2023).

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