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Editorial Introduction

Australian universities are under increasing pressure to support students to develop the graduate skills and knowledge required to transition smoothly from higher education into the professional workforce. The adoption of placement-based work-integrated learning (WIL) as a primary means to achieve this objective has become a prevalent feature of the tertiary education landscape. Nevertheless, while a substantial body of research and policy has highlighted the positive developmental benefits of WIL placements, the dominance of mandatory unpaid placements can adversely impact student wellbeing. Approaching unpaid WIL placements through the lens of equity and social justice, summarising the body of work on this topic by the authors, this briefing paper offers recommendations for making WIL work for students, industry and universities in response to the interim report of the Australian Universities Accord.

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Approaching unpaid work-integrated learning placements through a social justice lens

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Prior to the transition of vocational qualifications to universities, certain fields of study, including teaching, pharmacy, and nursing, relied on apprenticeships as the established method of learning via hands-on training in the workplace under the guidance of experienced and certified professionals (Hewitt et al., 2017). Since then, industry has considerably reduced its role in training new personnel and professionals, shifting this responsibility to students and higher education institutions (Grant-Smith & Weiler, 2023).

For many academic programs, participating in work-based placements is obligatory and requires individuals to engage with a workplace environment, whether physically or virtually, for an extended duration. This hands-on experience is intended to connect theoretical knowledge with practical application and to provide exposure to the world of work; however the diverse composition of the student body poses a challenge in ensuring fair access to high-quality work placements. Intersectionality further magnifies the potential for vulnerability, disadvantage, and inadvertent discrimination, particularly affecting women and those from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds (Hewitt & Grenfell, 2022). Nevertheless, because work-integrated learning (WIL) placements are positioned as universally advantageous for participants, there has been less consideration of the potential adverse effects of participation on students' social, psychological, and economic wellbeing (Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2018).

The recently-released Australian Universities Accord interim report represents the most significant review of the tertiary sector since the 2008 Bradley Review (DEEWR, 2008). It emphasises the need to "prevent excessive debt and rising student cost-of-living pressures from discouraging people of all ages from pursuing higher education and completing their qualifications" (DoE, 2023, p. 16). One of the areas of particular concern is in relation to work-integrated learning (WIL) and equitable access to internships and other work placements. In response to the interim report this briefing paper argues adjustments are needed in the planning, delivery and oversight of WIL to guarantee both equitable access and the wellbeing of students.

As shown in Figure 1, regulatory and practice reforms are required in four intersecting areas: payment and financial support, placement duration, alternatives to placement, and resourcing and staffing.

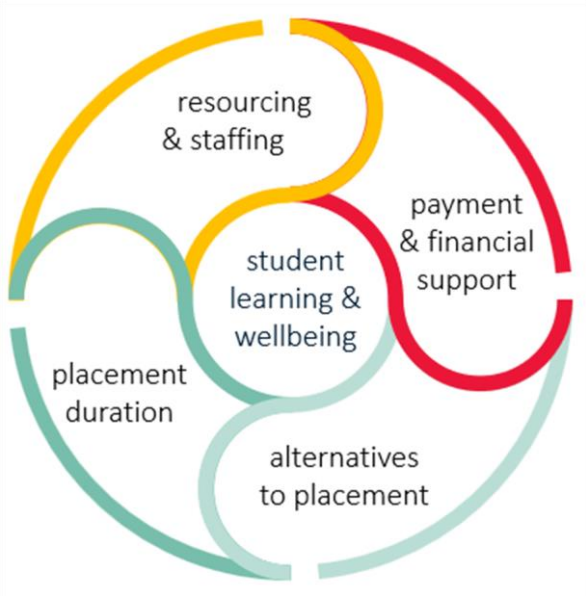

Figure 1. Changes required to centre student learning and wellbeing in work-integrated learning

Provide payment or financial and other support for WIL participation

Many students experience significant financial stress in relation to WIL participation (Grant-Smith & de Zwaan, 2019, 2023). Where possible, students should be paid for placements, particularly in cases where it could be argued they are undertaking productive work (Grant-Smith & McDonald, 2018a). Amending the *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth) to remove the requirement that a vocational placement is not remunerated, or to clarify other supports are not remuneration, would enable host organisations to offer financial or other assistance to students without risking the imposition of a wider range of labour law obligations than they are prepared to accept (Hewitt & Cameron, 2023). Creative regulatory schemes, such as providing tax incentives for eligible organisations to host and pay students completing WIL placements such as have been trialled in Ontario, Canada (Ministry of Finance, 2022), could also incentivise payment for placements by industry.

When placements cannot be paid, it is important to acknowledge that extended unpaid placements can lead to significant financial stress for students who are financially independent, particularly those who rely on paid work to survive, as this source of income typically needs to be forfeited during placements, although equity bursaries or similar financial assistance is provided by some universities (Cameron & Hewitt, 2022).

Alongside this support, students completing mandatory placements that are not tied to a specific unit of study (such as the extramural WIL required of veterinary science students or placement hours requirement in engineering), could receive support to cover additional WIL-related costs through an extension of government support available to eligible students (via Youth Allowance, Austudy, and ABSTUDY) or OS-HELP.

As students participating in work placements often experience significant levels of psychological stress, in addition to financial stress, as well as challenges in balancing their studies with other commitments, universities also have an obligation to allocate resources to offer social, academic, and psychological support to WIL students.

Work with professional accrediting bodies to limit placement length

Just as industry declarations of a graduate skills deficit saw universities prioritise certain employability skills in course delivery and design, there are concerns that a further embedding of placement-focused WIL will simply raise the experiential bar on what is required to be considered employable, placing further pressure on students (Jackson & Collings, 2018). In order to enhance their chances of securing graduate employment, some students may turn to additional (and sometimes illegal) periods of unpaid work (Grant-Smith & McDonald, 2016). While these efforts may be well-intended, the absence of formal oversight in such arrangements could potentially expose students to exploitative and unethical work practices and leave workplaces vulnerable to legal action for violating labour laws. Therefore, the push to increase WIL placement participation (Universities Australia, 2019) must be coupled with collaborative efforts by government and industry to grow the market for paid employment opportunities for graduates and students, and regulatory oversight from universities and TEQSA to ensure quality WIL experiences are delivered in which student learning and wellbeing are paramount.

Australian regulation is currently silent on the maximum duration of WIL placements, but regulation in other jurisdictions, such as France, imposes limits on how long a placement can extend, how many WIL participants can be hosted by one employer, and minimum supervision requirements (Hewitt, 2021). In Australia, placement length is set or strongly influenced by professional accrediting bodies. Over recent years we have seen these requirements increase considerably, with disciplines such as social work requiring 1000 hours or more than 70 days of unpaid work. Universities should work with professional accrediting bodies to identify where mandatory placement hours could be reduced (Hodge et al., 2021) or where alternative forms of work experience could be recognised, including virtual WIL experiences, simulations and recognition of prior learning.

Consider alternative approaches to placement

The assumption of deficit driving the emphasis on WIL placements in non-vocation degrees overlooks the fact that many students possess a range of transferable soft skills acquired from previous life, study, and non-professional work experiences. Where feasible, provision should be made for the formal recognition of prior workplace learning (Johnstone et al., 2016) which could be substituted for mandatory placement requirements. Additionally, it is imperative that employers recognise the skills and knowledges acquired via part-time non-professional work experience as valuable contributions to a graduate's skills profile and employability when making graduate recruitment decisions (Grant-Smith & Weiler, 2023).

There is evidence to suggest that some employers seek to materially and financially benefit from the unpaid work undertaken by students on placement, and may seek to exploit this (Grant-Smith & McDonald, 2018b). Alternative work experience models, such as service-learning via providing services to disadvantaged individuals and nonprofit organisations, offer an alternative to unpaid work placements and avoid such scenarios. A service-learning approach to WIL has multiple benefits for students and society, and reduces the potential for exploitation, while still meeting the employability agenda. An excellent example can be seen in the Federal Government-supported, and Australian Tax Office-administered, Australian National Tax Clinic Program embedded in 14 universities nationwide (ATO, 2022) which offers financial services to disadvantaged individuals and nonprofit organisations under supervision (Morgan et al., 2022). Adopting a societal approach to student skills development, this program provides real-world experience and enhances graduate capabilities and professional skills while also delivering contributions to society in relation to improved tax literacy, tax morale, compliance culture and tax justice (Kayis-Kumar et al., 2020).

Adequately staff and resource WIL programs

More mature and embedded approaches to WIL placements typically involve high levels of institutional oversight in the identification and selection of suitable workplaces and matching students with available opportunities. However, in some disciplines, there is a practice of requiring students to identify, negotiate and manage their own placements. This increases risks to students and the strain on industry to respond to these requests. Universities must accept a greater role in brokering and managing placements to ensure students are protected and industry is not unduly burdened responding to student requests for placement opportunities. This requires universities to commit adequate funding for training and employing WIL staff (Cameron & Klopper, 2015) as their absence can result in additional administrative workload being placed on other academic and professional staff. Combined with the high level of emotional labour associated with the academic supervision of placements, this can negatively impact the wellbeing of academic and professional placement staff (Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2020; Grant-Smith & Feldman, 2023). Failure to appropriately support and recognise the workload associated with managing WIL placements may also discourage experienced academics from undertaking this role or integrating WIL into their courses (Hewitt & Skead, 2023).

The attitudes and behaviours of workplace supervisors, co-workers, and clients during placement can also have significant impacts on student wellbeing. Appropriate training, support and vetting of potential WIL workplaces and supervisors is required to ensure that WIL workplaces are adequately prepared and supported to positively contribute to student learning, and that there is a common understanding of the learning goals of placement. This will require industry to commit to training the staff who will be supervising students to ensure a quality learning experience, and universities to take a proactive role in educating industry about their responsibilities as WIL workplaces (Hewitt et al, 2023). Universities must also be willing to monitor the (ongoing) suitability of potential WIL workplaces and cease partnerships with workplaces who have had repeated complaints raised against them, educate students about their workplace rights and responsibilities, and provide appropriate complaints mechanisms.

Conclusion

There are significant institutional and disciplinary differences in how work placements are organised and monitored across universities, disciplines and workplaces. Consequently, although there is no simple one size fits all solution, the fundamental principle guiding all WIL approaches must be providing quality learning opportunities without compromising the wellbeing of students. Further research is required to identify the most appropriate configurations of payment and financial support, placement duration, and alternatives to placement to make participation in WIL a tenable option for students experiencing wellbeing and financial stress.

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