

RP43

TITLE: Developing WIL leadership capacities and competencies: A distributed approach

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ABSTRACT:

This paper reports on an Australian government funded study to develop, trial and validate a framework and guidelines to support work integrated learning (WIL) leadership capacity building in university and industry, for national and international contexts. The paper outlines the methodological approach adopted in the research, and canvasses the key findings and the impact and significance of the framework for universities and industry.

The study collected data from WIL leaders in six Australian universities across three States and from industry partners in seven broad fields of education: Allied Health, Business and Tourism, Creative Industries, Teacher Education, Engineering, Information Technology and Sciences. The project was premised on leadership being “a distribution of power through the collegial sharing of knowledge, practice and reflection within the social context of the university [and industry organisations]” (Lefoe & Parris, 2008, p. 2). This distributed leadership approach referred to situations when leadership is distributed among multiple actors who support others in achieving organisational goals.

The resultant WIL Leadership Framework identifies five domains for WIL leadership: Shaping the vision; Creating and sustaining WIL relationships; Fostering WIL engagement, expertise and students learning; Communicating and influencing; and Driving organisational and joint industry/university outcomes. Following a validation process, which gathered advice, insights and guidance from university and industry WIL leaders and practitioners, advisory and reference groups, facilitators and evaluators, the Framework was identified to have multiple purposes: it is claimed to have uses as a support tool; a WIL vision tool; a promotional tool; and a leadership map.

SIGNIFICANCE OF WIL LEADERSHIP

In Australia, Work Integrated Learning (WIL) is a response to demonstrable and increasing demands for the tertiary education sector to provide graduates with improved employability skills through an industry relevant curriculum. This has been recognised in several Australian studies (eg, AC Nielsen Research Services, 2000; Universities Australia, 2008) and Commonwealth of Australia (2013). WIL is recognised for its role in providing “significantly higher engagement and outcomes” over students without WIL (Australian Council for Educational Research [ACER], 2011), which improves retention, supports the social inclusion agenda, and enhances the career development of students (Smith et al., 2009). Hence, attention is needed to develop leadership capability and capacity across the spectrum, from faculty and course coordinators to university executive staff. Further, as WIL is a collaborative enterprise, it is essential that leadership capacity is also developed in workplace supervisors and relevant industry managers. In the Australian *WIL Report* (Patrick et al., 2009), WIL leadership capability and capacity building was identified as a need for both institutional and employer sectors.

Building a successful WIL program requires a wide range of expertise, and WIL staff consistently report that within the academic institution there appears to be little understanding of the multiple skills required to conduct effective WIL programs (Bates, 2010). Embedding WIL into mainstream

curriculum and assessment activities requires strategic leadership at the institutional level, and the success of this collaborative enterprise is also reliant on effective leadership within the workplace.

This paper reports on an Australian government funded study intended to support WIL leadership capacity building across universities and industry, for national and international contexts. The definition of WIL applied in the project was that used in the *WIL Report* (Patrick et al., 2009, p.9) that defines WIL as "...an umbrella term used for a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum." WIL was therefore taken to include placements, projects, fieldwork, simulations, virtual or in-class experiences, and reflections on employment.

WIL leadership is expressed variously across the Australian tertiary education and employment sectors and its complexity is not always fully understood. Commonly, WIL leadership emerges as a dispersed and shared responsibility at many levels and across many areas. The work of the project was premised on leadership being "a distribution of power through the collegial sharing of knowledge, practice and reflection within the social context of the university [or employer organisation]" (Lefoe & Parris, 2008, p. 2). Importantly, therefore, the project was built on the notion that WIL leadership requires a distributed approach. The interpretation of distributed leadership used to underpin the project directions was that distributed leadership referred to both formal and ad hoc arrangements that divided leadership among multiple actors who supported others in achieving organisational goals.

Distributed leadership recognises informal, emergent and collective acts of influence as well as those instigated by people in formal positions of authority (Bolden, 2011). Leaders are not always managers and therefore a framework was necessary to recognise the capabilities exhibited by WIL leaders and how these capabilities might be developed at all levels of the sector, including WIL workplaces.

A key issue facing the Australian tertiary education sector is the need for strong WIL leadership to ensure the best possible outcomes for university students, staff and industry and community partner organisations. The increasing emphasis on WIL by both university and employer sectors has created a need to better understand the competencies, capabilities and capacities of WIL leaders. Hence, the project proposed to address the WIL leadership needs of experienced WIL academic and professional university staff, employers (including workplace supervisors), as well as senior leaders and those responsible for policy development within the university and industry

A best practice study of WIL in Australia (Orrell, 2011) recognised three essential elements – institutional, educational and partnership – for successful WIL. At the institutional level, a clearly articulated and shared vision of WIL within the university, including a shared understanding of its purposes and expectations, was required. This included the distinctive and complementary roles that the institution and workplace had in shaping and supporting student learning. Educational elements required support and integration in curriculum development and institutional strategic plans. Partnership elements needed to develop robust and mature relationships between universities and placement providers and to ensure that both university and host-organisation supervisory staff were provided with activities to develop their leadership capabilities. That study concluded that there was a need for scholarship on leadership and management at the higher institutional levels.

AUSTRALIAN WIL LEADERSHIP STUDY

Funded by the Australian government Office for Learning and Teaching, the six-university study responded to the need to support WIL leadership capacity building in both universities and industry and set out to describe the characteristics of WIL leadership.

The specific aims were to

- establish how and where WIL leadership was situated
- identify the critical challenges to WIL leadership capabilities and structures
- develop and test the distributive leadership approach to WIL within employer-based individual disciplines
- develop, trial and validate a framework and guidelines to support WIL leadership capacity building, nationally and internationally, and
- provide a sustainable framework and guidelines through a collaboration with the key national WIL professional association, the Australian Collaborative Education Network (ACEN).

The project had the following desired outcomes:

1. the identification and analysis of the organisational structures, policy context and characteristics of WIL leadership in Australia, including the key challenges faced by WIL leaders in both universities and employer organisations
2. the development of a WIL-specific leadership framework and guidelines to facilitate distributed strategic leadership development in Australian tertiary institutions and workplaces
3. the nurturing of a strong national and international community of WIL leaders in both tertiary institutions and workplaces.

The project drew upon the expertise of more than 100 experienced WIL leaders from across six Australian universities and their WIL industry and partner organisations. The study focused on seven broad fields of education: Allied Health, Business and Tourism, Creative Industries, Teacher Education, Engineering, IT and Sciences. Each university concentrated on a specific field of education and collected data from both university staff and partners across those fields. This single institutional focus on just one field of education allowed comments from university WIL leaders and employers to be aligned. It is interesting to note, however, that the data from the different fields of education produced very similar outcomes, and that the discipline did not impact on the findings.

Each of the universities exhibited a strong commitment to WIL, both in terms of its integration into curriculum and in the role that central support areas had in managing, overseeing or providing advice and support around WIL. A range of industry partners also provided data for the project. Typically these people were leaders within the organisation and/or were workplace supervisors of students. The project's partnership with Australia's key national WIL professional association ACEN was seen as valuable in recognising a collaborative, national perspective of WIL and WIL leadership and a mechanism to include international perspectives through ACEN's strong links globally

To achieve outcome 1, three studies of WIL Leadership were undertaken across more than one hundred experienced leaders of WIL in Australia:

- *The University study:* Facilitated focus groups and individual interviews were used to draw out information on the nature of WIL Leadership from forty-seven experienced university WIL leaders, academics and professional staff. Data were captured on WIL Leadership challenges, enablers, competencies and capabilities, and on capability development needs. Focus groups with members of the project team, all experienced WIL leaders, provided additional information.
- *The Employer Partner study:* An anonymous national online survey which included questions similar to those asked of university staff was conducted to capture similar data from organisations that have substantial experience of supporting WIL students in the targeted fields of education. Fifty-five employers representing widely diverse organisations contributed data.

- *The Narrative Study*: Individual reflections were provided by members of the Team, as representative WIL leaders within their universities, to examine the structure, characteristics, behaviours and directions of WIL, and to document their understandings of how and where WIL leadership is situated in five Australian universities, and to consider the institutional models, policies and practices that support and recognise WIL staff leadership.

In each case, the findings were reflected back to contributors and WIL stakeholders nationally and internationally for further input, before being finalised. Contributions from WIL leaders in the form of vignettes describing good practice formed the final data source.

To achieve outcome 2, the findings from these three studies were subjected to intense scrutiny by Team members, to establish five primary domains of WIL Leadership, scope the capabilities needed in each, and record strategies for their development. The key findings were developed into a summary matrix out of which a draft WIL Leadership Framework was developed, as a concise and usable instrument. Five final facilitated workshops were undertaken with university staff in five of the partner universities, to evaluate this framework and provide an understanding of the possible uses. Before finalising, the findings and Framework were presented to national and international audiences for input, and triangulated with prior work in the field (cite?).

To achieve outcome 3, the project undertook a collaborative partnership with ACEN, to achieve a sustainable WIL Leadership resource and perspective of WIL and WIL leadership that would endure beyond the life of the project. This included the provision to ACEN of an electronic form of the Framework showing the five key domains of WIL Leadership schematically, with links to relevant information that can be shared through ACEN's national chapters and through established links with National Associations in Asia, North America, Africa and Europe as well as through involvement through WACE.

To achieve aim 4, and to stimulate and support the WIL communities that are emerging in many institutions, and the efforts of the national body, ACEN, the Team used the opportunities presented by the project's work to gather WIL leaders in their institutions, share experience and expertise, present findings on WIL Leadership capacity development, offer the Framework as a resource, and capture vignettes of good practice to make them accessible through ACEN.

WIL LEADERSHIP IN AUSTRALIA

The study pointed to ten broad areas of responsibility which were identified as being crucial to WIL leaders. These areas were

- policy
- resourcing
- institutional culture
- institutional structures and systems
- external engagement
- staff capabilities and development
- pedagogy and curriculum
- access and equity
- research and scholarship, and
- partner organisational culture and systems.

Notably, the data identified that collaboration around WIL appeared to stem from two wider perceptions:

- Sharing and collaboration is the pragmatic way to achieve efficiencies in the facilitation of WIL.
- Participating in WIL networks and communities of practice enable staff to build their WIL

knowledge and expertise.

The findings drawn from these observations identified important and indicative approaches to WIL leadership. The data identified key challenges to WIL leaders, key strategies for enabling WIL and its leadership in both strategic and operational areas, and the capacities, competencies and capabilities needed by existing and emerging WIL leaders. This data was validated by inviting responses on the key findings by email, or online, from WIL leaders in the six partner universities and from the project's Reference and Advisory groups.

Several key themes emerged from the data collected from industry and partner organisations. The dominant themes identified by these organisations were:

- WIL enabled organisations to have access to students, thereby identifying future employees.
- Operational and resourcing issues impacted heavily on the ability of organisations to offer WIL.
- The suitability of student skills and attributes were important factors for industry and their level of engagement in WIL.

These key issues were identified as both enablers *and* barriers to involvement in WIL. This was similar to the university data where the same issues were often identified as both enablers and barriers depending on the outcomes afforded the institution.

While the findings revealed that some organisations were well resourced, organised and skilled in their management of WIL, the data highlighted a general need for better resourcing and support for WIL. The responses of WIL leaders in these organisations pointed in particular to the potential value of universities engaging organisations by providing

- clear information about WIL
- streamlined processes for engaging and communicating with host organisations
- resources to support staff who managed WIL in organisations, and
- student preparation prior to WIL and monitoring of student progress while undertaking WIL.

These findings pointed to the potential value to universities of providing wider and increased support and collaboration with organisations in the management and leadership of WIL, to raise WIL outcomes for all stakeholders.

The study confirmed that WIL leadership was often enacted in the absence of, or despite, a hierarchical structure because of the dedicated approach taken by WIL leaders. The distributed context of WIL practitioners across roles and settings meant that WIL leadership developed from need and purpose rather than by appointment. Therefore, to develop the culture and practice of WIL, leaders needed to lead by working collaboratively across their organisation, between organisations, and out into their communities.

The following are the key findings of the project:

1. WIL leadership occurs in, and is distributed across, diverse roles and settings in tertiary institutions and industry.
2. The distinctive nature and complexity of WIL benefits from the type of shared and collaborative relationships offered by distributed leadership.
3. The challenges WIL leaders face in tertiary institutions, disciplines and industry are broadly similar.
4. The capabilities required by WIL leaders are similar across tertiary institutions, disciplines and industry, and can be grouped into five domains, to form the WIL Leadership Framework:

- shaping vision and policy
 - communicating and influencing WIL
 - creating sustainable WIL relationships to strengthen WIL culture
 - fostering engagement, expertise and learning in WIL, and
 - driving outcomes that serve the needs of WIL stakeholders.
5. Industry and partner organisations seek enhanced collaboration and support from tertiary institutions in order to implement and maintain effective WIL activity and to build staff WIL capabilities.
 6. WIL vision and strategic intent are important drivers of WIL practice, irrespective of whether the institution has, or does not have, a formal WIL policy.
 7. Resourcing and acknowledging the work of WIL leaders is a recognised need for all sectors of WIL practitioners.

Along with these findings, the project reconfirmed a number of existing perspectives around WIL and WIL leadership. This project reconfirmed

- the critical importance of strong leadership in WIL in achieving good WIL outcomes in the sectors
- the power of an integrated whole-of-organisation approach
- the importance of grassroots commitment which has generated an upsurge and renewed interest in understanding WIL leadership
- the challenges and barriers that need to be managed in the delivery of WIL in both industry and educational sectors.

Strategically, WIL was found to operate in universities that had formal and centralised policy and support as well as in those that did not have such policies and support. What was interesting, however, was that WIL leaders from both types of institutions desired formal and centralised policy around WIL. Two views were postulated to explain this. First, WIL leaders were looking for formal and centralised policy to provide institutional support for their work and to legitimise the development of WIL in universities. Second, WIL leaders were seeking support to develop and consolidate the relationships they have with WIL partners and organisations. An important factor in both of these views is the implication that with centralised policy comes resourcing. WIL leaders in all universities studied were able to secure some resourcing, but all universities considered they needed more.

WIL LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK

A significant outcome of the study was the development of the WIL Leadership Framework, which was drawn from the key findings and an interpretation of the data. The Framework identified five domains for WIL leadership: Shaping the vision; Creating and sustaining WIL relationships; Fostering WIL engagement, expertise and students learning; Communicating and influencing; and Driving organisational and joint industry/university outcomes.

The WIL Leadership Framework (Figure 1) is a conceptualisation of how WIL leadership can be enabled and enacted. The five domains draw together and describe the key capabilities evidenced by WIL leaders across both university and employer settings. The distributed nature of WIL leaders across these settings and the many WIL roles that sit within universities and partner organisations emphasise the requirement to blend distributed leadership into the Framework. It is not that WIL leaders consciously use a distributed leadership approach, but that leadership is distributed across the many roles and settings in which WIL occurs.



The domain *Shaping the WIL Vision* was found to align with other leadership models (McInnis, Ramsden & Maconachie, 2012) and appears in the centre of the Framework because it linked the other four domains together. To shape the WIL vision, WIL leaders must create relationships, communicate and influence, foster engagement and drive outcomes. The multi-dimensional nature of the WIL Leadership Framework had layered each domain into its scope, and to indicative approaches that enable and enact WIL.

The WIL Leadership Framework has been identified to have multiple purposes: it can act as a support tool, a WIL vision tool, a promotional tool and a leadership map. The scrutiny and analysis of the Framework in these contexts have the potential to add to its practical significance and could therefore suggest an important direction for future research.

Although developed from Australian data and relating to how WIL is enacted in an Australian educational and industry context, the WIL Leadership Framework also appears to have resonance in a global context. Input from the international member of the reference group indicates it captures a global view. In addition while scoping the concept for the project, initial data was gathered by the Project team about key capabilities required for effective WIL leadership from attendees from a range of countries at a WACE institute. This data was matched with data gathered at an ACEN National Conference with clear synergies in both the key capabilities identified but also the broad ranking of importance by both Australian and International WIL professional and academic staff becoming evident. These capabilities include advocacy and strategic development of WIL, relationship building within institutions and with industry partners, fostering scholarship of WIL and enhancing the student experience which are identified in the WIL Leadership Framework. Although still needing to be further confirmed, it would appear that the framework's purposes to support and build capability within the Australian context, may indeed prove to be an effective mechanism

to enhance WIL capability and outcomes for universities and industry internationally. ACEN continues to consider future professional development opportunities to be developed for WIL staff in universities and industry based on the work of this project and the framework.

Other valuable future research leading from this project includes investigations on

- the characteristics of distributed leaders in WIL, including the characteristics of distributed leaders and whether they are recognised as leaders of WIL within their institutions or organisations
- the resourcing of WIL and whether it has been identified as a major issue at institutions and if it is being addressed
- whether more institutions and organisations have developed policies on WIL, what types of policies are generated, and the possibility of these being shared nationally or internationally, and

The WIL Leadership Framework (Figure 1 and detailed further in Appendix A) is a conceptualisation of how WIL leadership can be enabled and enacted. The five domains of WIL leadership draw together and describe the key capabilities evidenced by WIL leaders across both university and employer settings. The distributed nature of WIL leaders across these settings and the many WIL roles that sit within universities and partner organisations emphasise the requirement to blend distributed leadership into the Framework. It is not that WIL leaders consciously use a distributed leadership approach, but that leadership is distributed across the many roles and settings in which WIL occurs.

Within the WIL context, a number of dimensions are observed which define the roles and settings for WIL. These dimensions provide a spectrum of perspectives which must be considered within the WIL context and include

- the balance between WIL in universities and WIL in industry
- WIL delivery in large and small industry and community partner organisations
- WIL practice in universities, disciplines and organisations with a long history of engaging WIL, compared to those that have adopted WIL as a more recent initiative
- the level of organisational focus on WIL, including policy augmentation, resource allocation, pedagogical development and structural support for WIL, and
- the role descriptions and responsibilities of WIL practitioners and leaders, including professional/academic responsibilities and in university/industry settings.

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