Discussion Paper

Transition to work for onshore international students in Australia: A literature review on the effectiveness of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) models

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Abstract

WIL has been promoted as an effective means of linking theory and practice through meaningful experiential learning experiences. This is premised on the philosophy that learners learn best through active engagement in meaningful activities and students are active learners and producers of knowledge. Australian institutions often use different models to facilitate the delivery of WIL to students regardless of whether they are local or international students. This raises some concern about the relevance and practicality of WIL experiences for onshore international students who, once they acquire their Australian qualifications, will likely return and work in their own countries where the working environment and business context are sometimes markedly different. In designing these WIL models it is assumed that students, regardless of their background and context, desire certain outcomes which are often common to most, a one size fit all solution.

To date there has been limited investigation into the effectiveness of a uniform application of WIL models. Anecdotal evidence shows there are deviations between local students’ outcomes and international students’ outcomes. The most recent literature in relation to the impact of WIL experiences on employment of this student cohort, including the examination of pedagogical frameworks that underpin WIL practices, the characteristics of onshore international student cohort, actual implementation of uniform WIL models and the contexts in which WIL experiences and learning may be translated into positive practical employment outcomes, shows the importance of further research and the need to implement an evidence based approach to WIL.

Keywords: work integrated learning (WIL), WIL models, onshore international students, WIL experience, effectiveness, practicality.
Introduction

Work integrated learning (WIL), also referred to as learning in the workplace (LiW), is a structured method of combining classroom-based education with practical work experience. It has been claimed through research that employers value job experience in their newly-hired workers. A WIL experience provides academic credit for structured job experience. This approach is taking on new importance in helping students making the school-to-work transition, service learning and experiential learning initiatives.

Work integrated learning has been promoted as ways to link theory and practice through meaningful experiential learning experiences based on the philosophy that learners learn best through active engagement in meaningful activities and viewing students as active learners and producers of knowledge. WIL, from the student perspective, is about job readiness and is a gateway to lifelong learning. Students are expected to learn not only the technical skills of the chosen profession but also workplace cultural and other transferable skills such as communication, organisation, team work, etc. that are directly relevant to their employability as well as their ability to have a successful and fulfilling career.

In the past decade in Australia, WIL has been well recognised as a value-added element to Higher Education (HE) courses and has, more traditionally, played an important role in the delivery of Vocational Education (VE) and Further Education (FE) courses. As WIL continues to gain global recognition, many Australian universities now have dedicated WIL programmes to assist the design and implementation of courseware and educational models for their institutions. Several studies to date have pointed to the conclusion that more work placements, however, does not mean better quality provision (Martin, 1997). Although the growth of full-fee international students in Australia for the 2009 calendar year was strong with 60,192 new enrolments, it should be noted that declines in enrolments continue to be recorded in markets
such as New Zealand, Bangladesh, Hong Kong and Japan (AEI, 2011). It is, therefore, important to examine further Martin’s (1997) observation for this specific onshore international student cohort.

Australian institutions often use different models to facilitate the delivery of WIL to students regardless of whether they are local or international students. This raises a concern about the relevance and practicality of WIL experiences for onshore international students who, once they achieve their Australian qualifications, will ultimately return and work in their own countries where the working environment and business context are sometimes markedly different.

The focus of this paper is to examine literatures available around the effectiveness of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) models on learning outcomes of onshore international students in Australia. It explores the conceptual learning framework that underpins the approach as well as discussing the differentiation points that will help in the design process of these WIL models for onshore international students. The elements commonly affecting the progress of achieving expected WIL learning outcomes for onshore international students are noted. It also outlines the developments and findings of related researches of WIL programmes conducted in Australia and the UK.

**WIL and its expected outcomes**

Work Integrated Learning, as defined by Griffith University, is the term used to describe educational activities that integrate theoretical learning with its application in the workplace. These educational activities should provide a meaningful experience of the workplace application that is intentional, organised and recognised by the institution, in order to secure learning outcomes for the student that are both transferable and applied. WIL activity may be variously described as a practicum, placement, internship, industry project, work experience or
industry experience. Moreover, the WL activity may involve students spending time in work, work practice, work shadowing, or industry project carried out in an industry setting, or for “industry”.

The fundamental concept of WIL is not new and covers a wide spectrum of learning activities. It is reflected in historical models of apprenticeships, particularly in the professionally based areas of nursing, education and engineering, in relatively unstructured work experience programs in a broad range of discipline areas and even in education models that use workplace-based case studies in the classroom (Gibson et al., 2004). These models of learning can be recognised to varying degrees within the credit allocation system of the home institution and may or may not be structured within a defined learning framework. Although the benefits of WIL are numerous and well-documented, the experience of work is not in itself intrinsically beneficial, rather in order for learning to come from the experience, the programme needs to provide a meaningful experience, one that is intentional, organised and accredited by the institution (Harvey et al., 1998).

Orrell (2004) observed that not only students (including international students) but also other stakeholders involved in the WIL can all benefit in the following ways:

- For onshore international students, this can provide the opportunity to enrich or learn both generic and discipline specific skills, relevant to professional practice. The workplace can also provide students with first-hand experience of the day-to-day operations of a real business, access to resources not available on campus, establishment of a work history, enhanced employment opportunities, access to an employer’s reference, the establishment of a network of professional contacts and the possibility of ongoing employment.
For Australian institutions, the benefits include their degree programs becoming more attractive to prospective students and providing a relatively straightforward mechanism to form new international partnerships with industry. These often lead to further involvement of the international industry partner in other activities such as consulting and collaborative research and development.

For companies and communities involving in WIL, the primary impetus is often to complete a specific task or project which may otherwise, not have been resourced. Additional benefits for the industry partner include an opportunity to monitor student performance with a view to longer term employment, an opportunity to train students with specific skills suited to the organisation, access to resources and facilities of the institution, access to specific academic staff through WIL networking events, employment flexibility, establishment of a working relationship with the institution and an opportunity to engage with bright, energetic and focused young people with new ideas to boost creativity and innovation in the workplace.

Existing WIL models and features for success

As the value of work-integrated learning continues to gain global recognition, there is an increasing abundance of models and processes used in its implementation. However, delivery of WIL programs leading to the realisation of potential benefits for all stakeholders is not a simple task, and there are many different WIL models worldwide attempting to address these issues (Gibson et al, 2004).

WIL has long been used as a pathway for work-readiness in professional education. Although it has become an integral component of the overall educational model in Australia, the use of terminologies is still not standardised. Institutions develop and use their own typology and terminology. There is considerable overlap between models, with certain benefits and
shortcomings common to many. However, at a broad level, WIL can be described into nine significant models: pre-course experience, sandwich courses, co-operative programs, cognitive apprenticeship or job shadowing, joint industry university courses, new traineeships and apprenticeships, placement or practicum, fieldwork, post-course internship with identifiable characteristics as outlined in Table 1 below.
Table 1- Summary of WIL models, their structure and their disciplines of application
(The tabulation uses the classification system of Martin (1997) and a framework of recommendations developed by the PAS Task Force at Victoria University)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Pre-course experience</th>
<th>Sandwich course</th>
<th>Co-operative programs</th>
<th>Cognitive apprenticeship or Job shadowing</th>
<th>Joint industry university courses</th>
<th>New traineeships and apprenticeships</th>
<th>Placement or practicum</th>
<th>Fieldwork</th>
<th>Post-course internship</th>
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<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>Work experience as a pre-requisite for entry</td>
<td>Periods of work experience between years of a course, usually complete a 12 month ‘thick’ sandwich or two 6 month ‘thin’ sandwiches</td>
<td>Periods of work experience that may be integrated into the overall curriculum, designed both to integrate theory and practice and improve graduate employment</td>
<td>Emphasis on observation and absorption of organisational culture of the workplace</td>
<td>Courses jointly developed with and funded by an enterprise. Uses enterprise staff as teachers/assessors</td>
<td>Flexible arrangements based on a registered training agreement and structured on-the-job or off-the-job training</td>
<td>Extended periods in work settings to learn skills and gain experience of requirements of future work</td>
<td>Short periods (e.g. one day a week) of fieldwork in an agency to observe and learn about the organisational culture of the workplace</td>
<td>Work experience after completion of the course</td>
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<td>Examples</td>
<td>Farm work for agriculture classes</td>
<td>Engineering courses eg: Sheffield Hallam University Middlesex University Brunel University</td>
<td>Business, science and engineering courses eg: MQ - International Interns, UWS Co-op programs, RMIT, QUT – Science &amp; IT</td>
<td>Law and political science courses</td>
<td>Engineering, business, many VET courses</td>
<td>Many VET courses</td>
<td>Medical, nursing and education eg: UTS Engineering Internships, MQ Chiropractic Internships</td>
<td>Social work, science, geography courses</td>
<td>Medicine and law eg: UTS – Dip. Scientific Practice</td>
</tr>
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</table>
International student’s profile and their contribution to Australian economy

International students are distributed widely across higher education institutions in Australia. Data from Australian Education International (AEI), the Commonwealth Government’s international education arm, shows that there were 491,565 international students studying on a student visa in Australia in 2009, an increase of 13.3% on 2008 figures. This compares with an increase of 17.2% between 2007 and 2008. The VE/FE sector recorded the highest growth in student numbers (25.9%), followed by Higher Education (12.2%), English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) (4.2%) and other (7.1%). The majority of students are from Asian countries including the top five China, India, Republic of Korea, Malaysia and Thailand.

According to Australian Education International (2011), international education activity contributed $19.1 billion in export income to the Australian economy in 2009-10. This is 2.8 per cent up on the $18.6 billion earnings in the calendar year 2009 and up 10.2 per cent on financial year 2008-09. Of the total export income generated by education services, $18.5 billion was from spending on fees and goods and services by onshore students and a further $581 million was earned through offshore educational activities. In 2009-10, the higher education sector generated $10.6 billion in export income (57.4% of total on-shore earnings). FE/FE was the second largest, generating $5.1 billion in earnings (27.7%). Export income from schools was $852 million (4.6%); ELICOS, $1,033 million (5.6%); and non-award, $597 million (3.2%). Education services is Australia’s largest services export industry ahead of other personal travel services ($12.1 billion) and professional and management consulting services ($3.1 billion).

Historical and forecast trend data indicate the demographic characteristics of international students in Australia tend to be younger with limited or no work experience. This
has importance implication in the design and development of suitable and effective WIL models to meet their specific needs.

While the economic and social value of international students is clear enough, the market is a volatile one. There is intense competition for international students from other countries such as Britain and the United States, while many of the developing nations that supply students are rapidly expanding their own education systems.

Given the substantial economic impact of international students on Australian institutions, it is important that Australian institutions and the Government generally seek to maximise the overall educational experience and outcomes specifically sought by these students. As WIL becomes one of the key value propositions offered by the Australian educational system, highly tailored WIL solutions are desirable. However, this need will inevitably be balanced against the limited resources available for the development of highly effective WIL models.

**Internationalisation and Globalisation**

Australia has been an acknowledged success in one aspect of the internationalisation of higher education—the recruitment of students from other countries. Australia has been able to compete effectively in the global market place for students because it has the advantages of well-established and well-regarded providers, relatively good educational infrastructure, tuition in English, and because it is attractive as a safe destination for study, migration and investment *(DEEWR, 2011)*.

Australian education system, particularly in HE, is at the forefront of many processes of globalisation. HE now involves intensive global networking among institutions, academics and students, as well as with business and industry. This seems to well align with the global education market which is changing dramatically. Population demographics are shifting in many
countries (ageing populations in Europe, Japan, United States, United Kingdom, Canada and China and youth bulges in South East Asia, the Middle East and Africa), skills needs are constantly evolving, students are becoming better informed about their options for education, competitor countries are developing strategies to challenge Australia’s market position, and education is becoming more globally connected. It is difficult, therefore, to predict with any certainty the long term trends (*DEEWR, 2011*).

The progressive nature of internationalisation and globalisation means a drastic adjustment process for education institutions around the world. It logically points to the standardisation of curriculum development and generalisation of contextual contents. However, research to date, although limited, has indicated that despite internationalisation and globalisation, the need for highly tailored programmes has heightened. Intuitively this observation leads to a conclusion that while at the general level there has been a process of standardisation across different educational systems, there subsists a requirement still for highly customised programmes, the differentiation points of which may reside in the application of initiatives such WIL in the core curriculum. This is required in conjunction with workforce planning due to global trends regarding labour distribution based on cost and competition across a borderless world.

**The challenge of international students in the context of WIL**

Australia presents particular challenges for international students. Socially (and geographically), it is isolated from the most populous regions of the world. Since most international students derive from Asian nations there is the addition of significant cultural and linguistic distance. Moreover, there are cultural issues that relate specifically to education including different educational philosophies, practices, and systems (*Neri and Ville, 2006*).
International students also face with learning issues. A recent longitudinal study of first year domestic and international students at Australian universities concluded that, ‘the signs of the academic stress experienced by international students during their first year at an Australian campus are unambiguous’ (Neri and Ville, 2006).

English language is one of the most challenging issues for international students. In a study at Flinders University, Smigiel and Harris (2007) concluded that the predominant issue centres on English language competency, supporting network, WIL arrangement and resources.

In 2008, Universities Australia recently released a position paper “A National Internship Scheme: enhancing skills and work-readiness of Australian university graduates”. The paper calls for collaborative action between universities, governments, industry and community organisations to enhance the employability skills of students and graduates. The paper reports broad support for a national scheme from stakeholders based on feedback during consultations. Some initial respondents to this review have suggested that Australian universities should also provide better support to international students to ensure they are more work ready, both here in Australia and in their home countries, and that there needs to be better alignment between migration, employment and education policies to facilitate the enhancement of international students’ employability skills (DEEWR, 2011). This is signalling that a better understanding of the effectiveness of current WIL models for international students in Australia is warranted.

The role of Australian Institutions and Governments

The regulatory frameworks that govern the provision of educational services to international students vary between countries. In Australia, the Australian Government has the primary responsibility for public funding of higher education. The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) is the Australian Government Department with responsibility for administering this funding and for developing and administering higher
education policy and programs. Decision-making, regulation and governance for higher education are shared among the Australian Government, the State and Territory Governments and the institutions themselves. By definition within Australia, universities are self-accrediting institutions and each university has its own establishment legislation (generally State and Territory legislation) and receive the vast majority of their public funding from the Australian Government (DEEWR, 2011).

Under the broad regulatory framework in Australia, it appears that the assessment of WIL and its effectiveness measured by students’ outcomes are the responsibility of educational providers. However, there is capacity for Government coordination at the national level so that better alignment of these programmes across different institutions can be achieved, giving students greater mobility in their course works.

**Findings of related studies**

While there is a considerable body of work on WIL in general, there is however very limited studies specifically about the employability of WIL and the effectiveness of these programmes for onshore international students. Although this study’s object is “graduates” in the context of WIL, there are still some commonalities with the below research entitled “Chinese international students’ perceptions of their Problem-based Learning experience in tourism-related courses at universities in the UK”. This research was conducted by Dr Rong Huang, Lecturer in Tourism and Marketing at the University of Plymouth, UK. It should be noted that the focus of this study was on students currently undertaking their course. In addition, the researcher’s focus was specifically on problem-based learning.

The research found both positive and negative perceptions. Eighty nine point four per cent of the respondents admitted that PBL made them feel satisfied when their ideas were accepted by classmates. Eighty per cent reported that PBL was more interactive than their own
learning style. A majority of the students also reported that PBL allowed them to learn on their own. However, only a small group of the students (29.4 per cent) thought that PBL enabled them to learn more effectively and to learn from classmates. And only 6 students (7.1 per cent) supported the view that PBL improved creativity. All the interviewees gave positive perceptions of their PBL experience. However, the students were very uncertain on the accuracy of the knowledge acquired (80 per cent of respondents admitted their uncertainty). This was supported by the fact that 70.6 per cent of respondents were not sure if they had understood the material content and were not sure about what do for the problems (60 per cent). Twenty-eight of the responses (32.9 per cent) claimed time was wasted in class, and it was also felt by some that teaching was not focused (32.9 per cent). Meanwhile, 28.2 per cent of the respondents also complained that the workload was heavy and required extra effort and work outside class.

It is easy to see that Chinese students might have difficulties adjusting to this new style of learning experience, which was a total shift from ‘teacher-oriented teaching’. These suggestions could be taken into consideration for future modification of courses. The students may be more receptive to the PBL experience if they are involved in the process of deciding what they want to learn, and how to learn at the beginning of the course. A combination of traditional lectures with the PBL sessions at the beginning of the semester and then progressively moving towards more student-driven PBL may possibly be a way to make Chinese students more receptive to this new learning method.

The study suggests that while WIL may be useful in delivering the outcomes required, does not necessarily translates to a good experience or the achievement of the ultimate outcomes for international students. It is interesting to note that there is very little literature in this area of research. Anecdotal evidence has indicated that WIL is definitely perceived as a value
proposition by international students. However, whether this is the case has not yet been demonstrated by research to date.

**Conclusion**

The overall review of this paper suggests that Australian institutions should reexamine the “real” impact of their current WIL programmes, their practicality and employability for onshore international students. A collaborative approach on how to address urgent and obvious WIL issues facing onshore international students may be required by all parties involving in WIL activities.

The literature on WIL has unanimously concluded that WIL has delivered better outcomes for students, educational providers and business community. Relevant WIL has the potential to provide direct and significant benefits for students, workplaces, universities, and in turn, the wider community.

The potential benefits of WIL for all stakeholders can be clearly articulated. However, these do not automatically occur in every program. Positive outcomes must be carefully developed and worked toward actively by motivated participants, whilst consciously avoiding known difficulties. The challenge for Australian universities is to develop a flexible programme with wide applicability across the spectrum of more generalist degrees, whilst maintaining a critical attitude to its pedagogical value (*Gibson et al., 2004*). Social, economic and historic forces are making WIL more relevant than ever, including emphasis on educational institution – industry – government cooperation, a fluid and demanding workplace, new technology, the need for continuous on-the-job learning, globalisation, and demand for accountability.

In order to resolve many issues international students experience during their studies and particularly during placements, there should be a good induction together with an in-depth and
hands-on preparation, and ongoing support in terms of supervision before and during placements.

To date there has not been much research in the area of WIL and its effectiveness when applied to onshore international students in Australia. Anecdotal evidence shows there are deviations between local students’ outcomes and international students’ outcomes. The proposed research topic will endeavour to answer some part of this as yet unclear conclusion.
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