Moving WIL and placements online

Work Integrated Learning (WIL) is an "umbrella term for a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum" (Patrick et al., 2009).

The working USQ definition of WIL (as currently included in our DRAFT Employability Strategy) is:
"a formal organised experience in which students:
a) do authentic work,
b) are supervised/ given feedback by industry staff, and
c) participate / contribute in usual environments for that industry."

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is a crucial learning modality, particularly for developing employability: the "knowledge, skills, attributes, reflective disposition and identity that graduates need to succeed in the workforce" (Kinash et al., 2016, p. 951).

WIL has a positive impact on employability across disciplines (Zegwaard & Rowe, 2017): it allows students to build confidence in themselves as professionals (Billett, 2011), and to acquire and refine important industry-specific skills (Jackson, 2015).

The problem

It is often difficult for students to find a placement in their desired industry for a variety of reasons:

» employers may not have capacity to take on many WIL students (Atkinson et al., 2015)

» increasing numbers of placement-seeking students are saturating some industry sectors (Collis, 2010)

» rural and regional students may not have WIL opportunities nearby

» students in equity groups – such as parents – face additional hurdles in undertaking WIL (Peach et al., 2016)

» Employers may not want to take on international students because of cultural differences or because of perceived or real visa restrictions (Jackson, 2017)

» COVID-19 distancing restrictions and physical workplace closures (ACEN, 2020).

Online WIL has been considered inauthentic, a 'simulation' of work rather than 'the real thing'. Many 'online WIL' experiences are indeed simulations rather than opportunities to engage in actual online work (Schuster & Glavas, 2017).

However, as employment and employers are increasingly located online (Houayek et al., 2014), the digital employability skills gained from an online WIL placement are particularly valuable (Foundation for Young Australians, 2017).

As work increasingly occurs online – particularly in the COVID19 period – online WIL is critical for ensuring that students are equipped to work effectively and confidently in dynamic digital work environments (Kay et al., 2019).

The solutions

A solution to this situation is to create online WIL opportunities. This can take several forms:

1. **Online placement:** *students work online under the supervision of an online industry partner; online is a usual environment for this type of industry work.*

Students undertake placements with an online industry partner.

■ **Strengths:** internship can be done from anywhere, students' physical abilities are less relevant, students develop important experience in digital workplace cultures and practices, less risk to university than physical WIL experiences.

■ **Limitations:** students may feel disconnected, requirement for students to have computer equipment and internet.

RMIT University's ABC Fact-Checker project is an excellent example of online WIL: in this initiative RMIT's multidisciplinary team of students undertakes the real work of journalistic fact-checking for ABC online, tv, and radio content (see **www.abc.net.au/news/factcheck/**).

2. **Consultancy approach:** *students work collaboratively online on real industry projects under the supervision of industry professionals.*

Universities source projects from industry partners; students work in online consultancy teams to complete the projects for industry.

■ **Strengths:** students work in multidisciplinary teams, students can work from any location, provides important experience in project-based work.

■ **Limitations:** need for ongoing industry partner engagement, need for clear project brief, IP considerations.

For example, UniSA's Peer2Peer WIL project scaffolds interdisciplinary teams of students to work collaboratively to develop social media campaigns for industry organisations (see **unisa.edu.au/Business-community/galleries-museums-and-centres/match-studio/projects-research/**).

Deakin's FreelancingHUB is another example of this approach (see **deakintalent.deakin.edu.au/freelancinghub/**).

Design considerations

As with any WIL placement, the University and the industry partner must work in partnership to scaffold the student's experience as a structured opportunity for learning. Additional focus on ensuring that students remain connected and in communication with both the University and the industry partner may be required. Assessment of online WIL should be the same as assessment of offline WIL: it should include pre-placement preparation, reflection in action, and reflection post-placement. Visa limitations to online WIL are dynamic, and need to be reviewed regularly.

Online WIL not only allows universities to expand placement opportunities for students, it also facilitates students' digital employability (Kay et al., 2019). COVID19 has made clear the fact that the digital environment is a 'real' work environment, with real workplace cultures, practices, and skills: if we are to ensure that as many students as possible have WIL experiences, and if we are to ensure that those WIL experiences will prepare them for the real world of work – a world which is increasingly online – we need to understand, lead, and scaffold online WIL.

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