

Issues and challenges identified in the development of a broad multidisciplinary work integrated learning package

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Work integrated learning (WIL) units can be discipline specific and constructed for majors or degrees with a strong vocational orientation. This paper describes an undergraduate unit with its genesis in a public relations internship. The original unit enjoyed strong support from industry partners and was instrumental in many graduates securing employment. The school owning the public relations major also offers other majors and degrees and sought to capture the eagerness of students to engage in workplace participation, but against an institutional imperative to consolidate teaching activities. The challenge was to create sufficient universality without diluting the success enjoyed by the PR internship program or detracting from the need for effective WIL outcomes. The result was a set of processes, assessments and management practices that could be efficiently and readily adopted by any participating discipline. The unit could run every semester and separate disciplines could opt in or out. Efficiencies were to be optimized while still delivering the outcomes desired by students, industry partners, and the academics involved. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 2013, 14(4), 295-304

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Work integrated learning (WIL) has been defined by Patrick, Peach and Pocknee (2009) as “an umbrella term for a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum” (p. iv). Precision Consultancy (2007) describes the practice as “a generic term to subsume a range of programs which provide students with a combination of workplace experience and formal learning which are integrated as part of a course of study in higher education” (p. 29). The prevalence of WIL in formal education is increasing internationally, with European countries, the United States and Australia giving greater consideration to providing students with opportunities to meld theoretical knowledge with practice (Costly, 2006). In the Higher Education sector, improved graduate employability remains a key objective behind the inclusion of WIL in degree programs. McIlveen et al., (2008) define graduate employability as the “relationship between present and future industry and community demands for specific labour (as knowledge and skills), and concomitantly, the labour an individual has to offer” (p.14). With graduate employability a commonly promoted buyer benefit used by Higher Education institutions in the marketing of their course offerings, tertiary institutions are under increasing pressure to provide ample opportunities to deliver on such promises. Further, with the sudden appearance of and fervor around Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) that provide free university study to anyone with internet access, incorporating WIL may prove to be critical for the survival of many courses.

WIL is generally discipline specific and constructed for majors or degrees with a strong vocational orientation; the model has long been part of teacher training, nurse education, and like courses. Within the school upon which this study is based a WIL experience is part of the curriculum for students undertaking majors in public relations, journalism and community welfare. However, as a school with a very broad set of humanities and social science disciplines, most degrees and majors did not have a WIL component. The school’s

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public relations internship unit is highly successful. In 2011 one-third of PR students were offered employment from their placement provider before graduation.

There was a degree of duplication across the school's three separate WIL-type subjects, particularly in terms of administrative activities, prompting plans for consolidation for the purposes of efficiency. This provided an opportunity to think more creatively about the school's WIL activities, particularly in relation to the six disciplines within the school that were not providing WIL opportunities, mostly in humanities and social science fields that were considered to be less vocational. Furthermore, in a climate of tightening budgets, even with a strong interest in and commitment to providing WIL opportunities to their students, these particular disciplines could not justify the costs and resources involved in the development of their own internship, especially given the experimental nature of such a venture for non-vocational courses. Therefore, the concept of multidisciplinary, centrally coordinated WIL was pursued, with the aims of broadening the internship experience to a wider cohort of students and boosting the value they derive from their course, as well as optimizing efficiencies for existing programs.

There is a dearth of research relating to WIL in the social science and humanities disciplines, especially in the form of a multidisciplinary offering within the higher education sector. While literature exists in relation to multidisciplinary programs and their assessments (Dunn, Schier & Fonseca, 2012; Russell & Hannah, 2012), it is related to disciplines within the building industry and the health services sector; both considered traditionally vocational when compared to those within the social science and humanities sphere. One study published by Macleod and Chamberlain (2012) specifically explored the challenges of encouraging participation from humanities academics to facilitate WIL opportunities in the area of social enterprise. A number of parallels are clear when comparing Macleod and Chamberlain's (2012) research with the characteristics of this study. Firstly, their BA program also previously had internship opportunities for journalism and public relations students, but none for humanities related disciplines such as history or sociology. There was a strong demand for WIL experiences, however this was imposed by policy change within the university that mandated that all degree programs were required to "provide students with the opportunity to have completed a WIL experience prior to graduation," (Macleod & Chamberlain, 2012, p.195).

The source of the impetus differs for the situation described in this study because we were not acting under any policy requirements. Instead we left decisions regarding compulsory versus optional WIL completion to the discretion of the individual discipline. The demand in this study stems directly from the student cohort within the School and was evident from a recent online survey of 68 students within the school that showed 75% (50 students) would undertake a WIL unit in their discipline if one was available, and that a combined 96% found WIL to be extremely (66%) or reasonably important (29%). Although the sample of this survey was small, all disciplines within the school were represented, indicating that even students from disciplines not traditionally considered vocational were interested in accessing a WIL experience before graduation.

PROCESS

The school sought to leverage the eagerness of students to engage in workplace participation while they were completing their degrees, but in a climate of tightening budgets, creating internships or industry placements for each discipline was not economically viable, and nor

would higher levels of management allow the creation of a suite of new subjects. Indeed consolidating WIL offerings would serve for us another purpose of increasing enrolments within our WIL offering and thus staving off demands from faculty masters that subjects with low enrolments be cut. This consideration meant we had to adapt an existing offering rather than create a new one. The principal challenge then arose to creating an omnibus offering that incorporated sufficient universality without diluting the success enjoyed by the existing public relations internship program, which had to meet accreditation standards set by a national professional body, or detracting from the need for effective WIL outcomes.

A feature of the approach taken is a generic shell in terms of theoretical and pedagogical framework that enables a range of disciplines (despite their vast differences) to participate effectively, yet autonomously within the shell and thus not require separate subjects. This required a curriculum review of all participating disciplines in terms of current and desired WIL offerings, including discussion as to how WIL would fit into respective courses. The discussions with discipline heads to identify particular needs had to be tempered with the need to optimize the balance between what could be made generic versus the need for each academic field to maintain relevance and distinctiveness.

GENERATING BUY-IN

The majority of the discipline heads were hesitant or uninterested in participating in the new multidisciplinary unit. This reaction was similar to that experienced by Macleod and Chamberlain (2012) in the development of their multidisciplinary WIL in the humanities where the perception that adding a WIL dimension to a BA, where traditionally students were encouraged to undertake "...tertiary study for its own sake," (p. 196) was perceived by academics as devaluing its scholarship. This conflict was also likened by Macleod and Chamberlain (2012) to a balancing act between "the traditional stance of scholarship in the humanities with the contemporary demands of preparation for the workplace" (p.204). As such, the decision of the majority of our school's disciplines not to participate in the WIL subject prompted further investigation in the form of informal conversations with discipline heads into the barriers preventing social science and humanities disciplines from adopting WIL as part of their curricula. The questions asked included:

1. What are the reasons behind why you do not want your discipline to participate in this WIL subject?
2. What are the barriers preventing you from agreeing to be involved?
3. What would it take for your discipline to be involved in the future?

BARRIERS PREVENTING ARTS AND HUMANITIES DISCIPLINES FROM ADOPTING WIL

At least one informal conversation was conducted with each Head of Discipline in person and/or via email during a one month period when the university paperwork was being finalized. A teleconference was also conducted with discipline heads that showed some interest in the concept. Three main themes emerged regarding the hesitations in adopting the WIL as part of a discipline's offering: lack of professional roles directly relating to the discipline, undefined vocational outcomes, and a lack of resources to research and develop WIL experiences that are of benefit to the student, to industry and to the curriculum. A similar set of barriers were articulated by Macleod and Chamberlain (2012), who identified a strong conflict between the traditional view of scholarship in the humanities being

knowledge for its own sake, and attempting to produce graduates who are ready for the workplace. It was apparent that there was a fear that theoretical knowledge gained would be undermined if forced into a vocational setting. Furthermore, disciplines such as journalism or public relations were named as “easier” in terms of finding suitable internships for students, yet disciplines such as history were seen as more problematic as there is not a clear career progression for its graduates. This is clearly an unimaginative response, but when it was suggested that history students might find relevant (and engaging) WIL experience with a museum or a similar institution the most prevalent attitude was that it would be too difficult and time consuming to organize. The age-old refrain of existing excessive workloads, followed by lack of time and resources, was also perceived as a major barrier preventing academics from developing WIL experiences for their students. As this would be a new offering for many students, the majority felt underprepared and not knowledgeable enough in WIL, or perhaps were simply too isolated from their wider discipline and did not know where to start to engage with relevant industries and fields outside the tertiary sector. This position of insularity is not unique to undergraduate studies. Common complaints arising from many candidates working towards or completing research doctorates are the lack of engagement with potential employers and an uncertainty regarding transferability of skills in the wider field. These concerns are increasingly pertinent with higher numbers of PhDs being produced each year and fewer positions for them in academia.

Most of the heads of discipline expressed a need for time to research how to develop a WIL experience that was both relevant to their discipline and enriching for the student, university and the internship provider. Time was also identified as a necessary component in building the relationships with industry necessary to provide students with positive WIL experiences. Therefore, for the disciplines that decided not to participate in the WIL unit, the perception that doing so was too difficult needs to be addressed before change can proceed in this area at a wider level. It is likely that currently non-participating disciplines will look to the first year of the unit being offered to ascertain its success before establishing the confidence to participate in future versions. Thus for the first round only the willing participating disciplines were included.

To begin the development process with participating disciplines, an audit was undertaken to answer the following questions:

1. Did the discipline already have a WIL offering?
2. If so, how was it structured in terms of entry requirements, prerequisites, how students were placed, placement hours, contact hours and assessments.
3. Could the current discipline-specific subject be disestablished and absorbed into the broad multidisciplinary WIL package without compromising accreditation with industry organizations such as the Public Relations Institute of Australia?

Table 1 summarizes the elements of three discipline-specific WIL offerings.

While there were differences between existing subjects (see Table 1), a number of similarities were evident, especially in terms of the administrative process for managing students undergoing internships or practical placements. Employer agreement paperwork is one example. It is a requirement of the University that the placement provider, the student and the coordinator all sign an agreement that details the legal requirements of all parties involved in the placement process. However, the University does not offer a standardized form (or even a template) and as a result each discipline within the School had created their own. Such duplicative processes were to be streamlined in order to save time and resources.

TABLE 1. *Comparison of existing WIL offerings within the School of Applied Media and Social Science at Monash University*

Component	Community Welfare and Counselling	Journalism	Public Relations
Minimum grade entry	None	None	None
Mode	Distance	Distance & On-campus	Distance & On-Campus
Prerequisites	Community development	Newsroom practice & theory Feature writing plus three level 2 subjects	Social media & online PR Engagement, publicity and promotion Crisis & risk communication or by permission
Placements	Coordinator	Coordinator	Sourced by student with guidance from coordinator
Workload	No classroom component	Two contact hours plus 10 hours independent study per week	Three 2-hour tutorials
Assessments	Pre-placement assignment 10% Learning plan 20% Mid-placement assignment 30% Field Educator's report Field education assignment 40%	Essay 20% Analysis of professional practice experience 20% Presentation 10% Work folio & evaluation 50%	Tutorial participation (including presentation) 15% Professional PR portfolio 15% Reflective log 45% Sponsor evaluation 20%
	60 day block field placement	Minimum 70 hours	160 hours
Credit	Equivalent 2 subjects	Equivalent 1 subject	Equivalent 1 subject
Employer evaluation	Field educator's report	Online survey	Evaluation teleconference with student, sponsor & coordinator
Forms	Learning plan	Evaluation forms (intern & sponsor)	Sponsor agreement form

To further accommodate the differing requirements for each discipline, broad ranging and non-specific terms were to be utilized in the subject description:

This unit provides the opportunity for students across a range of disciplines to participate in a workplace placement appropriate to their major. It offers a critical understanding of discipline-specific industry environments through the provision of practical work integrated learning. Students will participate in and contribute to a workplace setting and organisation relevant to their chosen discipline; have the opportunity to integrate theoretical knowledge gained throughout the duration of their course with the practical skills necessary to successfully function in a relevant workplace setting; and begin to assemble a practical work portfolio that will assist them to find work and secure career advancement. (Monash University, 2013, n.p.)

A CONSOLIDATED APPROACH

Placement

For the new multidisciplinary WIL subject students are required to attend a two hour session to deal with expectations (of and from students), assessment, procedures, policies, and other issues. This session includes a presentation by a representative from the University's career development section to highlight and scaffold the "professional skills and knowledge" or "soft skills" (Winchester-Seeto, Mackaway, Coulson, & Harvey, 2010, p. 69) that students will require to function successfully in the workplace during their internship. In addition, students must complete four hours in total of discipline-specific seminar/discussion split between the start and the middle of the semester. The first discipline-specific seminar informs students about the particular theoretical knowledge they will need to apply and the conventions that they will need to work within in their particular workplaces; with the objective of scaffolding this knowledge and to further develop skills before their internship experience begins. For example, the public relations internship students complete a number of activities such as role play exercises to simulate the "professional skills and knowledge (the so-called 'hard skills')" (Winchester-Seeto et al., 2010) they will be required to draw on during their internship experience.

The mid-semester session provides an opportunity for students to check in with their discipline supervisors as well as with their fellow classmates to discuss their experiences, challenges and successes, and to seek clarification about the assessment tasks where necessary. The remainder of the time (approximately 12 hours per week across 10 weeks) will be spent on assessment tasks, participation in online discussion, assembling a portfolio, and engaging in internship activity. The particular internship activities consist of a further 70 to 160 hours of experience in a relevant workplace approved by the discipline supervisor. The range of 70-160 hours of internship was chosen in order to accommodate the existing requirements of the disciplines that previously had WIL subjects, so that they could be absorbed more seamlessly by this new offering.

Assessment

The group discussed at length what assessment tasks would be most appropriate for meeting the objectives of improving graduate employability and optimizing efficiency within the School. The three existing WIL subjects had some tasks that were similar, such as a reflective diary in which the student details their learning and development throughout the placement. As Dunn, Schier and Fonseca (2012) have identified, reflective journals, portfolios and workplace supervisor/ mentor reports are common forms of assessment for WIL offerings in the higher education sector. As Table 2 conveys, these tasks were chosen as they directly address and assist students to achieve the subject's set learning objectives and provide the educator with relevant evidence to assess them.

The final assessment regime, as listed in Table 2, consists of four tasks.

Learning Contract - 450 words, 10%

A learning contract was deemed a vital assessment task so that the nature of the internship in terms of the location, tasks involved and achievable objectives are clearly communicated and agreed to by all three parties (sponsor, student and discipline supervisor) from the outset. When articulating the objectives for the internship, the student must consult with the respective discipline supervisor and internship supervisor, requiring the student to identify

Table 2: *Mapping the Assessment Tasks to the Learning Objectives*

Learning objective	Corresponding assessment task(s)
1. Quickly adapt to working in a discipline-specific professional environment	Learning contract Employer evaluation
2. Consolidate an understanding of discipline-specific professional standards, methods, and practices	Learning contract Employer evaluation Reflective piece
3. Apply and critically reflect upon knowledge gained across other study units	Reflective piece
4. Assemble the beginnings of a discipline-specific practical folio for use in seeking employment and career advancement	Folio
5. Expand links and networks in their chosen industry	Learning contract Employer evaluation

their own areas of learning and skill development and negotiate these with the university and industry. This also forms the framework for the unit as an individual experience, especially in relation to the reflection piece, and provides a focus for both the student and their internship supervisor to work together to achieve the agreed objectives. The mechanics of the process necessitates discussion between the student and the sponsor, which allows for an early opportunity for misconceptions and friction to arise and be dealt with early enough so as to not have a significant negative outcome. The discipline supervisor endorses the contract after adding comments for the benefit of the student and the internship employer.

Portfolio - 2000 words equivalent, 45%

Despite portfolio assessments being identified as time consuming for students to complete (Billet, 2009) and educators to assess (Winchester-Seeto, et al., 2010), the portfolio assessment task was chosen in response to a body of literature suggesting that developing a portfolio can assist students to become agentic learners, a skill that will assist them while undertaking WIL (Billet, 2009), and beyond. Furthermore, portfolio assessment maximizes flexibility as it can be tailored to suit the nuances of the different disciplines involved (Dunn, Schier & Fonseca, 2012). For example, in the public relations discipline the portfolio provides students with the opportunity to develop and finesse their curriculum vitae and showcase their work to a prospective internship provider or subsequent employer. However, criminal justice students will complete a research project based on their internship experience. The report eventuating from this research project is presented to the student's internship provider at the end of the internship and provides a similar opportunity for students to showcase their work to a real-life client or prospective employer.

Employer Evaluation - pass/fail

Again, the employer evaluation assessment task was left largely undescribed so that each discipline could mould it to their specific needs. It was decided not to provide students with

a percentage grade for this assessment as it would be largely determined by the feedback from their internship supervisor and this was deemed to be an additional imposition on the internship supervisor and there would be too much variation in how it was assessed between workplaces and sponsors. Instead, a pass or fail grade was deemed to be a better option, so too was making it a hurdle requirement. Feedback from the internship supervisor is important to the students' professional development and it also assists academics to identify gaps in knowledge that could be addressed in the curriculum. The form of this assessment is to be decided by each discipline supervisor, but is likely to be a written report by the internship supervisor, an online or hard copy survey, a face-to-face meeting or, as the public relations discipline utilizes, a teleconference. The teleconference format takes the form of a performance review where the discipline supervisor, the internship supervisor and the student are linked by phone and the discipline supervisor asks the internship supervisor a series of questions relating to relevant aspects of the student's performance in the workplace (e.g., teamwork, communication, initiative, areas for improvement, etc). The student can add to the conversation at any time. This format also provides the opportunity for the university (and the internship coordinator) to strengthen their relationship with industry without the time and costs involved in organizing face-to-face meetings. However, as each discipline is diverse, this assessment is likely to take on different forms depending on what is most relevant.

Reflection Piece - 2000 words, 45%

Scholars cannot agree on a single approach to reflection in relation to WIL (Dunn, Schier, & Fonseca, 2012). As such, it was decided that leaving the details for this assessment as broad as possible would be the best option to allow each discipline the opportunity to develop the most relevant approach for their students. However, there was a common understanding that reflection involves the student critically assessing their conduct and practice in the workplace in order to make sense and create meaning from their experiences, while developing and improving their attitude, approaches and skills (Billet, 2009; Harvey et al., 2010; Rarieya, 2005). Including reflection as part of the assessment has also been attributed to assisting students to make stronger links between theory and practice (Correia & Bleicher, 2008). The actual piece will take the form of an essay for some disciplines or a journal or a report for others within the 2000 word limit.

DISCUSSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

At the time of writing, the first student cohort was in the process of undertaking the new multidisciplinary internship subject, representing four different disciplines: Criminal Justice, Social Welfare, Psychological Studies and Public Relations. An evaluation has not yet been conducted, but preliminary anecdotal reports suggest that outcomes are positive. Importantly, the stakeholders in the disciplines that had a WIL offering previously – students, coordinators, professional accreditation bodies and industry sponsors – indicate a relatively seamless transition and no loss of fidelity in terms of discipline-specific critical skills. However, a more thorough evaluation is planned. It may take a couple of semesters though before data can be collected from a reasonable number of “non-traditional interns” in fields such as history and criminal justice. Wider participation of the hesitant disciplines in the school will accelerate the process.

From a coordination point of view, the subject increased in complexity when multiple disciplines were added; however, this is to be expected. Previously coordination involved

public relations alone. The multidisciplinary nature of the new offering, naturally meant working across more than one discipline while experiencing tension between the disciplines at times, was definitely a very worthwhile experience as it created a greater understanding between those involved. Dealing with internship providers from different disciplines was generally left to the discipline supervisor so as to both cultivate new relationships and maintain existing ones within relevant industries. In terms of administration, all paperwork was sent to a central administrative staff member who entered the data into a Google doc accessible to all discipline supervisors as well as the subject coordinator. However, the processes will be reviewed at the end of each semester to ensure continuous improvement for the University, internship providers and students.

The need for graduates to be better prepared for work is a relatively common refrain, and the WIL field is very active. The need to incorporate the non-traditional vocational disciplines often found in the humanities and social sciences is clear, though less work has been done in this area. There may be difficulty in securing directly relevant intern positions, however if the so-called 'soft skills' are as important as the 'hard skills' for future success, and some might argue they are *more* important given the likelihood that an individual will hold multiple positions during their career and that mobility is valued, then perhaps a directly relevant position is not critical. If a liberal arts student is supposed to be prepared to thrive in any situation with the ability to adapt to a range of career options then their internship could also be less specific to their course major. Such assertions need testing however.

The approach taken here would also deliver advantages for PhD candidates. Incorporating industry experience, in any research-related role rather than specifically and tightly linked to the candidate's thesis topic, may provide an advantage to that candidate when they finally complete and must forge a career in industry. The traditional pathway through doctoral studies to academia is open to fewer and fewer candidates.

CONCLUSION

Students and employers both see the need for tertiary graduates to enter the workforce prepared with a variety of skills and knowledge – both discipline-specific and no-specific – and this is the intention of WIL programs currently in place for students in vocationally oriented courses. Consistent with the experience elsewhere, the move towards a wider multidisciplinary WIL offering to accommodate a range of humanities and social sciences disciplines not usually served by WIL programs met with skepticism, resistance and a lack of interest from discipline heads within a multidisciplinary school. Three existing vocation-specific WIL offerings were consolidated and four new disciplines participated in the process to construct a new, more generic offering. Once the first couple of cohorts have completed the group will be in a position to report an evaluation in terms of experience and outcomes.

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