

# What value do stakeholders place on the academic standards and grading practices in work-integrated learning

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Assessment is said to drive student learning, though the value of a 'grade' within work-integrated learning (WIL) is still not clear and most field placement students do not want their learning to be assessed beyond a pass/fail grade. Is then, the 'learning' in WIL as important as 'learning' in non-WIL courses? The focus of this paper is on the 'value' stakeholders place on the academic standards and grading practices in WIL. Data from a small qualitative constructivist grounded theory study undertaken in the Human Services sector will be used and how to grade 'reflection' will link learning, assessment and grading practices, identifying the difficulties and challenges to mainstreaming WIL. The importance of employability from a WIL experience will be the focus of a future paper.

Keywords: Learning, academic standards, grading practices, WIL, reflective practice

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Historically work-integrated learning (WIL) and WIL-like educational approaches have been part of a student's higher educational experience for over 100 years. With a strong emphasis on the need for universities to produce work-ready graduates, WIL has become an important part of curricula. Clear definitions exist of what constitutes WIL, and what university and accrediting bodies expect as learning outcomes, across different programs of study, both internationally and nationally. Internationally WIL is an umbrella term used to describe all educational programs, with purposefully designed curriculum and learning strategies, that combine and integrate theory within the practice of work (Atchison, Pollock, Reeders, & Rissetti, 2002; McNamara, 2013; McLennan & Keating 2008; Patrick et al., 2002; Smith, Meijer, & Kielly-Coleman, 2010). A WIL course in Australia, is bound by the same higher education standards for learning outcomes and assessment as non-WIL courses. The Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015 (HES Framework, 2015), clearly outlines that the standards of course design and the expectations for the students undertaking the activity also apply to WIL courses. Therefore, the development of a WIL curriculum, which is specific to the workplace, is imperative to highlight the educational worth to all stakeholders.

The WIL curriculum will require academic standards which clearly address what the student is expected to learn through learning outcomes, clearly linked to assessment items and to graduate attributes. As students see a clear link between their achievement in assessment as evidence in achieving the learning outcomes. Due to a paradigm shift to a learning focused discipline underlined by the element of constructive alignment between student learning and assessment an "explicit transparent link between learning outcomes, assessment tasks and criteria" (Hargraves, 2004, p. 197) is required. Assessment "encompassing the rich scope of practice in both content and process" (Higgs, 2014, p.263), highlights the complexity of workplace learning. Assessing the complexities of practice and what a specific industry considers to be professionally competent will require students to be assessed by a third party, the workplace supervisor (Jackson, 2018). This relies upon work placements being supported by employers to be mentors/supervisors, "academics who want students to experience the transfer of theory into practice and students who want to be work-ready" (Orrell, 2004). All stakeholders of a WIL placement will need to be aware of the importance of work placements within a

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student's educational experience if the quality of a WIL experience is to be evaluated through the assessment practices that measure the student's development of skills and knowledge in the workplace.

Billett (2009a) encourages the development of teaching and learning resources in preparation for placement, during the placement and for reflection upon completion of the work placement. Learning is continuous, and students need to understand that as practitioners they will need to stay abreast of practice changes and adapt and become responsible for their own learning (Helyer, 2015). A WIL activity then needs to immerse students in workplaces that gives students an authentic real-world experience, while being involved in "holistic learning opportunities involving highly complex activities (Ferns & Moore, 2012). Critical reflection is a tool that allows learning to improve future practice and is successfully used both within WIL and non-WIL courses as an assessment item graded using academic grading practices. Many educators are using reflection as a tool to enable self-assessment in the field (Fines, 2014), as students need to understand what practice is and understand how to use all facets of their practice to make professional judgments and critical decisions (Higgs, 2014). Ferns and Zegwaard (2014) state "innovative assessment profiles that enable reflection on learning and the creation of artifacts that evidence generic capabilities are paramount" (p. 186). Reflection can then be identified as an effective tool in assessing students practice skills.

A WIL curriculum needs to be designed with an underlying understanding of the centrality of practice to workplace learning. Students and assessors place different levels of importance on a grade and in today's environment grades are required to meet professional criteria, to progress learning and for administration processes. Grading is a powerful tool that can identify the most valuable kinds of learning in a course and is "a symbolic representation of the level of achievement attained by a student" (Sadler, 2009, p. 807; Sadler, 2005). Grades are purposeful by having implications for a student's sense of achievement and subsequent learning (Shim & Ryan, 2005). Focusing grading principles on academic achievement standards to provide a link between the actual grade and the actual achievement is necessary. As differing perspectives of the grading process and what constitutes a deserved grade exists between students and educators (Tippin, Lafreniere, & Page, 2012), and was evident through this study. Woolfe and Yorke (2010) ask why assessment approaches do not reflect the blending of academic and practical components of a WIL course, for to grade the practical component pass/fail and academic assessment on a finer scale, leads to academic work being privileged.

Assessment of WIL is integral to effective WIL design, and it is necessary to be able to show the validity and reliability of learning outcomes as students should be gaining new knowledge and important information from completing an assessment item. The most authentic assessment is based on the real tasks associated to functioning effectively in the students chosen field of work (McAllister, Lincoln, Ferguson & McAllister, 2010). A key challenge remains in higher education to develop and implement effective assessment methods in WIL (Brodie & Irving, 2007; Orrell, 2011; Patrick et al. 2008). Richardson, et al., (2009) claim that assessors tend to assess what is easy to assess and do not assess core employability skills, (p. 28). Smith (2014) suggests that clearly articulated learning goals and different assessment protocols will be necessary in a WIL course while (Zegwaard, Coll, and Hodges, (2003) comment that defining what is to be assessed and the purpose (learning outcomes) paramount to a successful WIL activity. The effectiveness of the assessment in improving students learning in the unpredictable workplace relies on "clear definitions of threshold standards for judging competence" (McAllister, Lincoln, Ferguson, & McAllister, 2010, p.3). With the outcomes in a WIL course being unpredictable, variable and socially constructed (Garnett, 2012), inadequate assessment occurs due to a lack of understanding about the nature of learning in the workplace, what is being learnt and how

(Richardson, Kaider, Henschke, & Jackling, 2009, p. 338). By identifying what types of learning, the outcomes and why students are reflecting, assessment of reflective practice can be conducted.

Reflective practice is a critical skill that students need to develop to work effectively in diverse and complex practice situations (Hargreaves, 2004, p. 292). To assess reflective practice, a marking criteria or rubric with clear expectations (Parks & Kajder, 2010), benchmarking the expected learning outcomes for the student is required. Assessing the actual practice skills through reflection is complex as there are "multiple interpretations regarding the conceptual meaning of reflection" (Tsingo, Bosnic-Anticevich, Lonie, & Smith, 2015). Knowing that reflection is a "complex, intellectual and emotional enterprise (Ryan & Ryan, 2013, p., 244), highlights the importance for the student to know in advance through their learning outcomes that their reflective practice will be assessed (Moon, 2013). A clear structure tailored to the learner, with the context and environment informing the assessment method, (Ryan & Ryan, 2013) may lessen the challenge of assessing reflection and place significance for students as a worthwhile WIL activity. Therefore, if the workplace is clearly aware of the role in assessment of the student and the student is provided with strict assessment guidelines, reinforcement of the need for quality WIL curriculums will be evident to all stakeholders.

## CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The aim of the study was to identify why current academic standards and grading practices were being used, within a Human Services school. Research questions included: what are current stakeholder perceptions of grading practices in WIL courses and what complexities exist in WIL that challenge mainstream learning, teaching and assessment practices? Stakeholder perceptions, of assessment grading practices in WIL courses within the school and the impact to a student's experience were obtained from the study. The length of a WIL program ranged from 10-18 weeks. The assessment items differ across the five programs offered within the school and include; reflections, process recordings, learning plans, projects and presentations. All students undertaking a WIL course were currently assessed using a pass/fail grading system for individual assessment items and received a result of a fail or non-graded pass upon completion.

## METHODOLOGY

Constructive Grounded Theory (CGT) was used to interpret meanings and knowledge derived by understanding the world through the eyes and views of the lived experience of the research participants. This gives a voice to the multiple participants making their lived experience central to the data gathered. The study was conducted in two separate stages: (i) a survey consisting of questions related to the five different subject groups, and (ii) a series of focus groups gaining further data from students and academic staff. The response rates were low in some categories with only two of 25 employers responding and 12 (31%) of academic staff, five (20%) of field supervisors and 14 (35%) of students responding. The main areas focused on were grading, the field supervisor, and grade point average (GPA) score. The questions allowed for both dependent and independent variables to test the relationship between concepts and to describe information for example, who should assess a student's achievement in WIL (Nardi, 2003)? The surveys included comparable questions across the student, field supervisor and academic participants as well as individual questions for each stakeholder group. The employers' survey did not have any questions related to the other three stakeholder groups. Within the completed surveys, not all questions were completed by an individual participant and this occurred across all stakeholders. To obtain further data, focus groups were given a set of open-ended phrases to help identify any new emerging categories and or relationships within existing categories.

### *Survey and Focus Group Participants*

The survey participants chosen for the study included 40 students currently enrolled in a field placement course; 24 field supervisors from organizations on the school's online data base system (SONIA); 24 employers at the same organizations and 38 academic staff currently involved in both delivering WIL courses and non-WIL courses in HSV. All academic staff who participated in the survey had only graded student work against a non-graded pass system, therefore the inclusion of academic staff in a University elective WIL course (community internship), both increased the number of academic respondents and the validity of the respondents' data, due to the assessment practices for this course being a grading schema of 1-7 or pass - high distinction. Academic staff received a mailed copy of the invitation, with students, employers and field supervisors being invited to participate via email. To acquire valid and reliable diverse realities consistent with constructivists' views, multiple methods of data gathering were used. This was maintained through an invitation to take part in a focus group, resulting in one group of five students, and three separate focus groups attended by a total of seven academic colleagues. Colleagues who participated in the focus groups identified also as external field supervisors, and past employees from the human services sector. The core categories: confidence in grading; individual recognition; GPA score; grading methods; and effort and motivation; were used within the focus groups to prompt discussion. The research had ethics approval granted by the human ethics committee at Griffith University.

### *Limitations*

Due to the participants being non-random in terms of data being obtained from academics within HSV and only one other course and students only within the school, the transference of results is limited. Although the field supervisor and employer participants were randomly chosen, they have had contact with the researcher in some capacity and this may have reduced the number of responses. Statistical analysis by using tools such as SPSS was also not used within the study, due to the number of responses. Limiting the study to not include statistics may also limit the rigor of the study, even though a CGT study is about gathering the lived experience of a participant and keeping their voice in the findings.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

With higher education institutions pushing to deliver work-ready students', trusting that assessment methods used within a university are making worthwhile judgments of a student's capabilities and performances across the entire program, together with curricula structure accommodating WIL assessment practices are essential (Ferns & Zegwaard, 2014; Knight, 2002). Reflective practice enables students to learn from their own as well as other practitioner's experiences in the field. With students being able to assess their own skill development through different narrative medians including; digital stories, blogs, journals and learning circles. Giving students the opportunity to reflect on their practice, allows the student to see themselves as "active agents and lifelong learners within their professions" (Ryan, & Ryan, 2013, p. 246) and may support a learning process that is both cognitive and social. Field placement is an excellent space in which students can show, through reflective practice, how to learn from their own professional experiences (Mather, Mathew, & Peechattu, 2017) and is a "form of ongoing learning that involves engaging with questions of philosophy, ethics and practice" (McFarlane, Casley, Cartmel, & Smith, 2014, p. 47). Thus, assessing reflection can allow a learner to improve their practice and see its significance as an important tool in WIL.

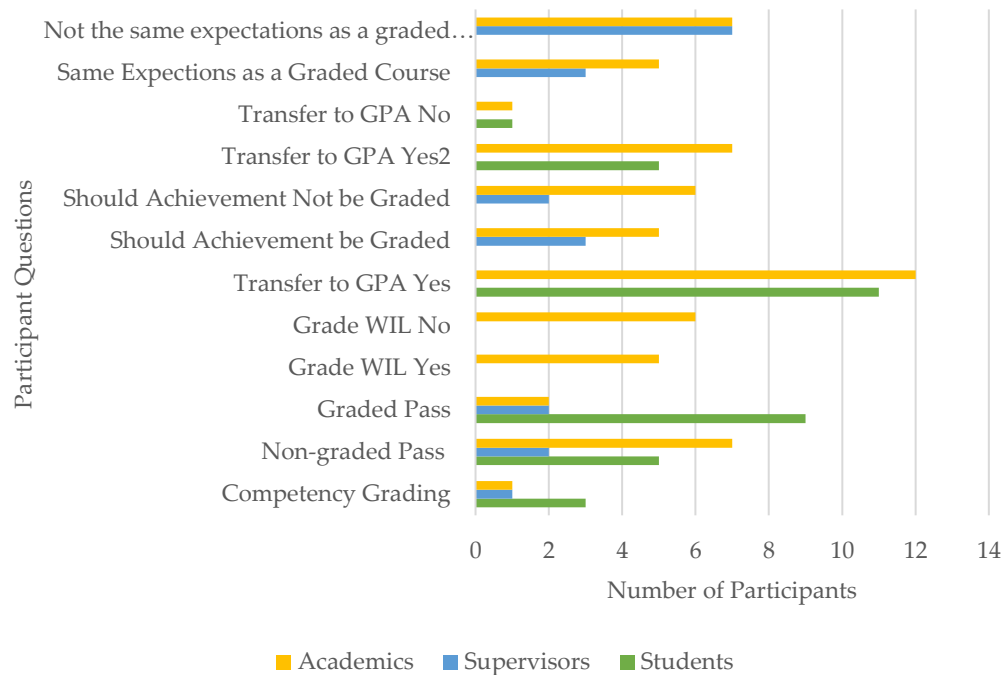


FIGURE 1: Stage one survey data showing that academics and supervisors and students do not have the same expectations of a WIL course that they do for a no-WIL course.

Analysis of the focus group findings showed confusion on the worth of assessing 'learning' in the workplace, even though an understanding of the importance for students to be able to develop the ability to critically reflect on their own practice, as reflection does not occur in isolation was evident. Students stated there is no relevance to placement on the level of academic work (reflections) being completed, while others clearly indicated the importance of assessing their skills and knowledge for future practice. Academic feedback added to the confusion indicating their feedback on reflections was more important than the student's ability to complete the reflective task. Is it as suggested that the reflective strategies or activities are more important to assess, than the how and at what level reflection is occurring, even though reflections containing emotional and intellectual discomfort allows the student to transform their ways of knowing (Ryan & Ryan, 2013). Do these findings also align with the identification of little literature being available on "how assessors mark reflective practice in relation to their perception of students' learning and development" (Cathro, O'Kare, & Gilbertson, 2017, p. 427)? Or does this identify the difference in the value shown to 'learning' in the workplace?

Fines (2104) reinforces how reflective tools are an integral part of the learning process as a self-assessment, though we do need to be aware of the challenges. Grading tools that are no different from those used for non-WIL courses can be used, highlighting the difference in the criteria for marking and maybe with rubrics to help assess, due to the skill of the reflection being assessed, "rather than the conclusions drawn from its application" (Fines, 2014, p. 2). Student focus group feedback showed students under stress while completing their placements and to be concerned about grades or their GPA score having a negative effect. One student focus group participant felt that students would put up a persona to receive higher grades from their supervisor and others stated they would be afraid to

ask questions in case the wrong question gave them a lower grade. One student simply stated that the whole purpose of placement is learning, not about being graded. Therefore, due to reflection being a metacognitive process, ensuring an assessment framework is adopted with tools to give validation and rigor to the assessment pieces is paramount (Parks & Kajder, 2010). For to not assess reflective practice can also give students the impression that it is not relevant for practice. Can then not grading a student's work in practice also affect their performance?

How grades impact on future work and life opportunities also affect a student's perception of grades. The current grading system used in this study is a pass/fail grading system. The study identified that the higher achieving students did not like the pass/fail grading system. While other students just wished to complete enough to pass and academics stated they have seen this attitude in both the University and Vocational Education and Training (VET) sectors. Supervisors, although they supported field placement to be graded, did not wish to be more involved in assessing student work. Supervisors were aware of the differing relationships they build, and some felt they were being assessed through the process and were afraid to fail a student. Though a relationship with their supervisor is required that will guide a student to become a future practitioner who is "an effective, self-directed and an agentic learner throughout their professional life" (Billet, 2009b, p.3). While all stakeholders are required to be involved in assessing a student on placement, the inclusion of the supervisor also highlights contentious issues in the workplace. Student data identified that students felt the relationship with their supervisor plays a part of what grade they give a student and evidence also implied that some supervisors were marking a task when they did not personally see the task completed.

Focus group discussion could not agree on the value of grading a WIL program. Discussion focused on a negative outcome eventuating through students not being motivated to put effort into their learning while on field placement and this is associated to the pass/fail grading system. Although, the pass/fail grading system can also be more equitable due to the diversity of the placement. Analysis of one WIL program outside of the school involved in the study that can be undertaken as an elective identified that students are more motivated to increase their GPA for future careers and study in this course as they received a grade. Researched by Merva (2003) and Gonella, Erdman, and Hojat (2004) also showed an increased level of student motivation and effort when their WIL was graded, which aligned with other academics in the focus group stating that to not grade devalues the academic validity of the WIL activity and contributes to the low status of WIL courses.

## CONCLUSION

What a student needs to learn and how to appropriately assess their learning within the field of Humans Services remains a contentious issue. Students will have differing perceptions about the difficulty of a task that they can perform and whether they can perform it, (Freudenberg, Brimble, Cameron, MacDonald, & English, 2013). A student showing their capability through demonstrating their employability skills and growth as a professional practitioner should be as important within the program as a purely academic course, or the transference of knowledge into practice will be deemed less important. The future human service practitioner needs to take responsibility for managing their participation in the practice setting and therefore their learning (Billett, 2015). For change and progress to remain the focus of learning, and for theory and practice to not become competing domains within a WIL university curriculum (Cooper, Orrell, & Bowden, 2010), all concerns need to be identified and raised as challenges/limitations to a successful WIL course to capitalize on the uniqueness of both

learning environments. Consequently, the design and management of a WIL curriculum is imperative and assessing the outcomes of WIL keeps it productive and focused on student learning outcomes.

Assessment plays a significant role in a student's experience of Higher Education. It impacts on the quality of their learning and what a student, and is central to the curriculum (Boud, 2000). Assessing learning outcomes relating to professional practice presents significant challenges to the design of a WIL course (MacNamara, 2013). Jackson (2018), identified research from Benett in 1993 through to Stark and Greggerson in 2016 still identifying challenges in the role of the supervisor being involved in assessing WIL. Research shows the impact grades can have on a student's future employment and study and positive impact on a student's sense of achievement. Should educators set out the expectations and assessment criteria in WIL courses to align with non-WIL courses in a degree/program? Or are stakeholders' expectations so different in WIL that academic standards and grading practices cannot align with the expectations in non-WIL academic courses to be valued the same within a university program? To embed WIL into existing policies and place equal status for WIL and non-WIL assessment processes within the university domain may be a step towards parity (Yorke & Vidovich, 2014). A clear framework is needed to understand what a grade means within a WIL course and its associated degree program focusing on learning outcomes.

## FUTURE RESEARCH

This qualitative constructive grounded theory study identified more questions, than answers. A research framework needs to be established to answer the following questions;

1. Should educators set out the expectations and assessment criteria in WIL courses to align with non- WIL courses in a degree/program? Or are stakeholders' expectations so different in WIL that academic standards and grading practices cannot align with the expectations in non-WIL academic courses to be valued the same within a university program?
2. Why are students differentiating between learning in WIL courses and learning in non-WIL courses? Should not the goal be learning in both and the student have the same passion to be rewarded through a grade?

This new research is required to establish if a student's current assessment in a WIL course, values the unique learning and growth that occurs in a field placement, to graduate human service practitioners who are work-ready to practice in an ever-changing international mobile society. The research will need to look more closely on current practices that exist between all stakeholders and place the student at the center of a new more flexible WIL curriculum.

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## About the Journal

The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning (IJWIL) publishes double-blind peer-reviewed original research and topical issues dealing with Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). IJWIL first published in 2000 under the name of Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education (APJCE). Since then the readership and authorship has become more international and terminology usage in the literature has favored the broader term of WIL. In response to these changes, the journal name was changed to the International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning in 2018.

In this Journal, WIL is defined as "*an educational approach that uses relevant work-based experiences to allow students to integrate theory with the meaningful practice of work as an intentional component of the curriculum*". Examples of such practice includes work placements, work-terms, internships, practicum, cooperative education (Co-op), fieldwork, work-related projects/competitions, service learning, entrepreneurship, student-led enterprise, applied projects, simulations (including virtual WIL), etc. WIL shares similar aims and underpinning theories of learning as the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training, however, each of these fields are seen as separate fields.

The Journal's main aim is to enable specialists working in WIL to disseminate research findings and share knowledge to the benefit of institutions, students, co-op/WIL practitioners, and researchers. The Journal desires to encourage quality research and explorative critical discussion that leads to the advancement of effective practices, development of further understanding of WIL, and promote further research.

## Types of Manuscripts Sought by the Journal

Types of manuscripts sought by IJWIL is primarily of two forms; 1) *research publications* describing research into aspects of work-integrated learning and, 2) *topical discussion* articles that review relevant literature and provide critical explorative discussion around a topical issue. The journal will, on occasions, consider best practice submissions.

*Research publications* should contain; an introduction that describes relevant literature and sets the context of the inquiry. A detailed description and justification for the methodology employed. A description of the research findings - tabulated as appropriate, a discussion of the importance of the findings including their significance to current established literature, implications for practitioners and researchers, whilst remaining mindful of the limitations of the data. And a conclusion preferably including suggestions for further research.

*Topical discussion* articles should contain a clear statement of the topic or issue under discussion, reference to relevant literature, critical and scholarly discussion on the importance of the issues, critical insights to how to advance the issue further, and implications for other researchers and practitioners.

*Best practice and program description* papers. On occasions, the Journal also seeks manuscripts describing a practice of WIL as an example of best practice, however, only if it presents a particularly unique or innovative practice or is situated in an unusual context. There must be a clear contribution of new knowledge to the established literature. Manuscripts describing what is essentially 'typical', 'common' or 'known' practices will be encouraged to rewrite the focus of the manuscript to a significant educational issue or will be encouraged to publish their work via another avenue that seeks such content.

By negotiation with the Editor-in-Chief, the Journal also accepts a small number of *Book Reviews* of relevant and recently published books.



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