

## Two institutional responses to work-integrated learning in a time of COVID-19: Canada and Australia

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As the world reacts to the impact of COVID-19, work-integrated learning (WIL) programs globally are similarly affected. Across Canada and Australia, thousands of WIL students either shifted to working remotely or dismissed from their WIL experience. This disruption impacted student learning, program delivery, risk management, staff capability, and industry engagement, and posed significant challenges for institutions. This paper presents the responses to COVID-19 by the University of Waterloo, Canada, and RMIT University, Australia, each guided by quality WIL principles and different WIL organizational structures. This paper outlines how each institution: mobilized staff, introduced program changes while maintaining quality, engaged industry partners and presented WIL program-based solutions to COVID-19 challenges. The paper concludes with discussion on challenges and opportunities that events such as COVID-19 has upon WIL programs, implications for other institutions and student outcomes. Consideration is given to post-COVID scenarios, and how WIL might need to be re-imagined.

Keywords: COVID-19, online WIL, quality, innovation, program flexibility, organizational structures, industry partnerships

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The impact of COVID-19 on the world of WIL was sudden and dramatic. WIL programs began to feel the effects as early as March 2020. In the Canadian context, the board of the national association, Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning Canada (CEWIL Canada), was called to an emergency meeting on Friday, March 13, 2020, at the behest of the student recruiter for one of Canada's major banks, who posed the question: "What would happen if we did not hire any students for the May-August work term?" This question proved to be the harbinger of what was to become one of the responses of the employer community to WIL programs. By May, 2020, a Statistics Canada report, *COVID-19 Impacts of the pandemic on postsecondary students*, identified that 48% of students had lost their jobs or been temporarily laid off, 26% had reduced work hours and 49% had lost their job prospects (Wall, 2020). Increasingly students reported being concerned about employment. These students had reason for concern, within the first few months both the entire University of Waterloo WIL program staff and 80% of WIL student work, transitioned to remote working. The remaining 20% of work terms could not be transitioned and were cut short. Employment rates for the subsequent term dropped over 25% with most of these unemployed students enrolling in academic courses that were unprepared for this unexpected increase in demand. Economic and labor market projections for the coming year are not encouraging, with the International Monetary Fund predicting economic recovery beginning no earlier than 2022 (IMF, 2020).

The University of Waterloo has Canada's highest participation rate in co-operative education (a form of WIL) at 72%, and in 2019/2020 had the highest number of students in paid, co-op work terms in the

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world with over 21,000 students working for over 7,000 companies in 62 countries (University of Waterloo, 2019). The program is important to the students' learning, University of Waterloo's reputation and contribution to society. In 2019/2020 alone, these 21,000 students earned over CAN\$270 million and contributed over CAN\$550 million to the businesses that hired them (Deloitte, 2019). Without question, COVID-19 posed an unprecedented threat to this program and the pipeline of talent provided to Canadian society (Braunstein et al., 2011). A significant response to the threat was required.

COVID-19 impact in Australia was evident as early as 1st February 2020 when, after the first COVID case was diagnosed in late January, the Australian Government banned anyone arriving from or transiting through mainland China from entering Australia. This had the immediate consequence of stranding up to 100,000 Chinese students from commencing their studies, resulting in a major crisis for Australian tertiary Institutions. A range of learning and assessment strategies and technologies were scrambled to commence teaching to this cohort online whilst they remained in China. Implications for work-integrated learning (WIL) started to emerge, initially focused on the impact on international students' engagement with WIL but then more generally as the pandemic unfolded.

WIL is increasingly a core component of the curriculum for students with many Australian tertiary education institutions making it mandatory for all students. Consequently, the potential scale of the COVID-19 impact on WIL in Australia was significant. In 2017, the only national profile of WIL was undertaken in Australia, where data indicated that 451,263 students undertook 555,403 WIL experiences with 43% of those experiences being placements (Universities Australia, 2019). This represented 37.4 % of students enrolled in Australian universities in that year with disciplines such as Health and Education with the highest rates of placements, with industry linked projects the most common WIL activity for disciplines such as Engineering, Information Technology, and Creative Arts.

RMIT has 56,000 students studying on its Australian based campuses with annually around 30,000 WIL activities including paid and unpaid placements, industry linked projects or simulated WIL experiences. This includes students undertaking WIL in both vocational and higher education courses. WIL is core to RMIT's pedagogy, history, strategy, and reputation with WIL embedded in almost all courses and amongst the oldest and largest programs in the country. After the local State Government declared a State of Emergency enacting a shutdown of all but essential services in mid-March, all campuses were closed with teaching for all students moved online. This resulted in the immediate deferment of all WIL placements or industry engaged projects unless they could be pivoted online as all businesses, apart from essential services moved their employees to working from home. All students on overseas WIL placements were advised to return to Australia immediately. Deferment of placements due to COVID-19 impacted over 5,300 placements scheduled for Semester 1 comprising both higher education and vocational education students including placements already commenced or planned. Preliminary internal data indicates that 36% of WIL placements were deferred or cancelled with the greatest impact in allied health fields such as osteopathy, chiropractic, and medical imaging and hundreds of education placements being withdrawn as schools were closed. Several thousand students involved in industry linked WIL projects were also significantly impacted.

Nationally, the Australian Collaborative Education Network (ACEN), the WIL association with over 40 institutional members, immediately activated a series of measures to support the WIL practitioner

community. Members were surveyed several times to determine the impacts of COVID-19 across the country and the strategies needed. Although not being able to definitively quantify the impact, a significant disruption with a drop in WIL placements across the country was identified with varying levels of success at pivoting to WIL online. The greatest challenges reported were in disciplines involving professional accreditation requirements where alternates to placement models were problematic and not consistent with existing accreditation standards (ACEN, 2020)

#### UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC: A CENTRALIZED APPROACH

The organizational structure for University of Waterloo is centralized. There is a staff team devoted to delivering WIL programs reporting to a central leader who reports into the Provost. While there is significant interrelationship including consultation and coordination with academic units, ultimately the employment of students and the relationships with employers and community resides with the WIL program. This structure allowed for a strategic, concerted, coordinated, and consistent approach across the campus.

#### INCREASED WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING PROGRAM FLEXIBILITY

The co-operative education program is accredited by the Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning association of Canada (CEWIL Canada) and is guided by the quality principles of Canada's Work-Integrated Learning Quality Framework (McRae et al., 2018). Canadian Accreditation requires that each work term be a minimum of 12 weeks, full time and paid in accordance with Canadian employment standards law (CEWIL Canada Accreditation, 2020). Recognizing the exigent circumstances that COVID presented, the program sought ways to increase the flexibility of the program while still adhering to quality standards as required by accreditation in consultation with academic programs and in collaboration with programs across the country. As a result, across the institution, and consistent with what was happening nationally, program length was allowed to be shortened to eight weeks, start and end dates were modified and remuneration other than salary, was allowable under certain circumstances. Important quality tenets of engaging in meaningful and productive work (Fink, 2003; McRae, 2015) and remuneration (Beard, 1998; Beggs et al., 2008) were adhered to. These program modifications allowed the continuation and addition of co-op work terms.

Pre-COVID, remote working rarely occurred and was not encouraged. The perceptions were that remote working ran the risk of lacking in some key quality student supports such as regular supervision (Peach et al., 2014), team collaboration (Fleming et al., 2016), and provision of feedback (Drewery et al., 2016). Post-COVID it was apparent that remote working needed to not only be accepted, but also required additional supports for both the employer and student. These resources were quickly developed and communicated to all students and employers in timely and consistent fashion.

While the University of Waterloo is known to emphasize entrepreneurship, there was limited entrepreneurial co-op which has its own considerations and benefits (Andrade et al., 2018). Program staff went into action to promote entrepreneurial co-op as an option for students and engaged with entrepreneurship academic program areas to provide more programming supports. Government funding provided some financial security for students who engaged in this form of WIL.

## INCREASED AGILITY OF WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING PROCESS

In order to establish and confirm over 21,000 work terms annually, the institution has highly developed and organized WIL processes. Considerable effort has gone into ensuring quality and consistency across all program areas. During pre-COVID times, this resulted in high levels of efficiency and productivity from a relatively lean team. What was required during, and will be post-COVID, was process modifications in a timely and proactive manner.

A specific example of a process modification was the introduction of group hiring. This was in addition to the traditional hiring processes, being transitioned overnight entirely on-line where employers posted job descriptions, students applied, interviews were conducted, matches, and hires confirmed. With group hiring, one job description served to hire large groups of students who were recruited and trained by the central WIL team and then deployed to the employer. In the first instance, this employer was the institution itself that hired 320 students to support faculty in developing on-line course materials. Having a central team allowed for rapid process changes, student hiring and training and while students were not engaged with their employer until they began their work term, they underwent the same hiring processes that contribute to employability skill development (Jackson, 2013).

Furthermore, there was a considerable expansion to the types of WIL opportunities made available and visible to students using a centralised opportunities board. Processes were developed to assist students in arranging their own jobs, creating a full work term out of smaller “gigs” and approving entrepreneurial ventures.

## INCREASED EMPHASIS ON PARTNERSHIPS INTERNALLY AND EXTERNALLY

WIL program success is highly dependent on successful partnerships across the institution and externally (Fleming et al., 2018). As a centrally organised WIL program, the team quickly mobilised to engage with key external stakeholder partners such as the Canadian federal and provincial governments, national associations, business associations, regional community partners and businesses. The purpose of this engagement differed by stakeholder. In the case of government, the objective was to influence policy and program changes which resulted in increased wage subsidy funding for WIL students, for example, with the Student Work Placement Program and Canada Summer Jobs program. National association engagement occurred within Canada and with other countries as we shared responses to COVID across the country and globally. Business association and regional partner engagement resulted in hiring initiatives with Chambers of Commerce and other associations. The work of the team retained 78% of Canadian employers, and ongoing work emphasised maintaining and continuing to build on those long-term relationships. Key to this success of maintaining these relationships was the team’s practice of ongoing communication with partners (Jeffries & Milne, 2014) which had been in place and were able to withstand the challenge of COVID-19. Another example of a successful internal partnership is the planned comprehensive alumni strategy to engage employers to source additional work terms drawing together both central and faculty based alumni areas.

## INCREASED INVESTMENT IN RESEARCH TOWARDS EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTIONS

One of the units within University of Waterloo's structure is the Work-Learn Institute (formerly known as WatCACE). The mandate of this Institute is to advance "co-operative education practice through conducting and disseminating research" (WatCACE, 2020). The Institute is currently conducting a research project on the impact of COVID-19 on those students whose work terms were disrupted in March, 2020. Over 1000 student surveys and 50 in-depth interviews were completed. This research will help inform the development of ongoing supports for both employers hiring and supervising students working remotely and students who work remotely. The importance of continuing to invest in research endeavors to provide evidence to help shape program and policy, was especially crucial during this time of unprecedented change and uncertainty.

## PROGRAM-BASED SOLUTIONS TO COVID-19 RELATED PROBLEMS

While COVID-19 presented challenges for WIL programs, it also provided opportunities to WIL to contribute solutions. In the case of University of Waterloo there are three examples of solutions: supporting academic staff in on-line course delivery and other student learning endeavors, supporting Canada's "digital main street" and participating in COVID contact tracing efforts.

COVID requires the majority of the population to isolate at home, and looks to do so, for much of the foreseeable future. Most interactions had to be re-considered as on-line versus face-to-face. This impacts how all organizations conduct their business, including institutions of higher learning. As mentioned previously, the Institution hired 320 students in May, 2020, to assist with a range of duties related to helping faculty develop and design their courses for on-line delivery. This enabled WIL students to engage in an urgent and important challenge facing our academic units, as 97% of undergraduate courses transitioned to an on-line format (Booth, 2020). The newly developed "group hiring" process mobilized students quickly through the recruitment, training, and onboarding such that they were helping faculty within two weeks of the start of this initiative. Preliminary feedback on this initiative is positive for both faculty and students as evidenced by increased demand for the next round later in 2020.

The private sector was also facing challenges as businesses strived to operate fully on-line. As a WIL response to this challenge, University of Waterloo did two things: first, developed a series of digital skills in partnership with internal and external experts to provide students with skills such as digital marketing, website development, video marketing, sales, and e-commerce. Second, partnerships were established with business associations such as the local Chamber of Commerce and small business centers to promote the hiring of students with these added skills to be of assistance helping to get these businesses on-line. Recently, the federal and provincial governments collaborated to provide over CAN\$57 million in funding to support businesses going on-line. Our WIL students are well positioned to be hired through this program to solve a pressing need in our business community (Davis, 2020).

Finally, as part of the government's plan to re-open Canadian society, the WIL program is being considered as a possible source of "contact tracers", individuals who contact the network of those who have tested positive for COVID-19. Should this program move forward, our WIL students through our newly adapted processes will be contributing to solving a critical COVID related problem through paid WIL opportunities.

## RMIT UNIVERSITY RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC: A DECENTRALIZED APPROACH

The organizational structure managing WIL at RMIT University is predominantly decentralized with a distributed leadership approach (Patrick et al., 2014.) supported by several discrete centralized units. Multiple discipline-based teams are responsible for the delivery of WIL. Organizational and associated reporting structures vary for WIL staff with few reporting into central units. The central units supporting WIL discipline-based staff across the three Australian based campuses, provide professional development, a WIL management system with associated reporting, legal advice, WIL procedures and processes, WIL staff resources, online credentials for staff and students and broader industry engagement support. A decentralized organizational structure is common in Australian Institutions, with few central institutional wide WIL units that manage all aspects of WIL (Edwards et al., 2015). This decentralized structure reflects the diversity of WIL models in the Australian context and the discipline links to their industry sector, enabling close engagement with the academic staff that facilitates flexibility and responsiveness.

Numerous complexities existed in achieving a unified approach to respond to the COVID-19 crisis with this RMIT organizational structure. A strategic project reviewing WIL operations had commenced in 2019. The COVID-19 crisis accelerated aspects of this project including the introduction of measures to intensify collaboration and clarify responsibilities across the discrete units to ensure a cohesive, institutional response. In recognition of its importance and the overall risk to WIL posed by COVID-19, WIL was added as one of eight strategic streams in the RMIT Business Continuity Management Plan, implemented to deal with the crisis by the Vice Chancellor's Executive Committee. Other strategic focus areas included streams on research, learning and teaching, student wellbeing and people. The aim of the WIL Business Continuity stream was to ensure students could undertake WIL, particularly placements, safely, maintain WIL continuity and secure a pipeline of relationships for future WIL experiences. A work-integrated learning decision group was quickly established to guide the institution on WIL through the crisis. Through these structures, WIL subject matter experts from across RMIT were called on to inform the decisions taken. This forged greater internal dialogue and collaboration across the key units involved, resulting in a less siloed approach.

In a complex, large organization such as RMIT, with a distributed leadership approach and decentralized organizational WIL management structure, establishing effective communication mechanisms to ensure consistent, accurate messages that cut through to all key WIL stakeholders is a significant issue. This, challenging under normal circumstances, was critically important to achieve as the COVID-19 crisis unfolded. All the usual student communication channels were centralized with only approved COVID specific information disseminated initially. The micro-credential to prepare students for WIL was rapidly modified, to include information about COVID-19 and undertaking WIL online. A specific mandatory module for COVID-19 safety was developed for WIL students.

Communication with WIL staff across the Institution was facilitated by a well-established Community of Practice. Meetings were increased to weekly, pivoting to a virtual format, over this period. A central set of frequently asked questions were developed for staff and students. General and discipline specific communications were provided for discipline based WIL staff to inform both students and industry about criteria for continuation of WIL experiences to ensure the messages complied with Government and RMIT's regulations.

## INCREASED WIL PROGRAM FLEXIBILITY

WIL experiences at RMIT are governed by an institutional policy, a component of the Institutional Program and Course Approval Process, that outlines minimum requirements for WIL around areas such as student preparation, authentic engagement with industry, supervision, risk management and assessment. Ensuring the quality of the learning and assessment of the WIL activity and compliance with this institutional policy based on the national WIL Guidance Note (Australian Government Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency [TESQA], 2017a), is the responsibility of the academic discipline. The WIL Guidance Note is based on the Australian Higher Education Standards Framework (TESQA, 2017b). RMIT's WIL policy also incorporates the four quality domains and standards: student experience, curriculum design, institutional requirements and stakeholder engagement, as outlined in the framework to support assurance of institution-wide quality in WIL (Campbell et al., 2019).

As a result of COVID-19, institution-wide WIL principles which included criteria for the cancellation or continuation of WIL placements were determined and implemented. WIL opportunities were deferred in Semester 1, 2020, with the exception of those that could be completed fully online, or that met state, territory or federal government restrictions or requirements for essential services, and where they were relevant, RMIT's risk assessment criteria and accrediting body guidelines. Risk assessments to determine where placements could proceed or be altered, were implemented, ensuring clinical placements complied with the National Principles for Clinical Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic (Australian Government Department of Health & Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020). Final year students in disciplines such as nursing, pharmacy and para medicine, were prioritized to enable them where possible, to contribute to the response to COVID-19. For Semester 2, 2020, options were announced for staged and gradual face-to-face WIL experiences to be introduced beyond these cohorts, with strict requirements for approved risk assessments and mandatory COVID-19 training to be undertaken. This was swiftly halted when the State went back into Stage 4 lockdown in August, 2020, as infections spiked.

Although there were already some examples of online WIL across RMIT (Parrott & Jones, 2018), the COVID-19 scenario resulted in WIL staff searching for answers about options to move their WIL experiences online quickly. Therefore, identifying what level of flexibility was available within the program and course approval process to achieve that was of high importance to staff. Students were able to undertake WIL placements online where an appropriate level of supervision was available, safe and secure work environment requirements were met, where learning activities enabled students to achieve the learning outcomes and academic integrity could be maintained. Changes to programs were allowed but needed to comply with program management guidelines, with RMIT implementing a more flexible approach to assessment with alternate assessment options available. Programs with professional accreditation proved the most difficult to transition online, with a degree of flexibility allowed by some professional accreditation bodies, but less flexibility from others. Nationally this precipitated the development of a *Joint Statement of Principles for the Higher Education Sector COVID-19 Response* (Australian Council of Professions et. al., 2020), which set out agreed principles to guide professional accreditation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Senior WIL staff at RMIT participated in the development of this statement through the peak bodies involved. Other initiatives were to expand work integrated learning experiences linked to enterprise formation and the development of an

entrepreneurial mindset through the RMIT Activator, with a new online multidisciplinary WIL program rapidly developed.

#### INCREASING STAFF CAPABILITY

There was an urgent need for professional development as WIL academic and professional staff across all disciplines with little prior online WIL experience and with short lead time, needed to suddenly pivot their WIL projects or placements. The strength of RMIT's WIL Community of Practice was utilized with the weekly virtual sessions, doubling and sometimes trebling usual attendance, showcasing good practice in online WIL delivery from across RMIT. Also, information was disseminated through the associated online discussion board which acted as a central source of information for over 300 WIL professional and academic staff, who shared ideas and supported each other. Presentations around preparation for online WIL, assessment and student safety were also given. Resources were quickly developed and disseminated to support staff including checklists and resources to support WIL online during this period.

National weekly webinars showcasing strategies to respond to COVID-19 were implemented by the ACEN over this period. The webinars were promoted to RMIT staff along with resources shared by many institutions from across the country. Key RMIT staff were actively engaged in the formulation of ACEN's national COVID-19 response and the information and resources gained, flowed back to inform RMIT's response and to support staff.

#### INCREASED STREAMLINING OF PROCESSES AND MANAGEMENT OF RISK

Rapid modifications to processes to support the pivot of students to online WIL and mitigate risks were implemented. Unlike Canada, many placements in Australia are unpaid although some, particularly students undertaking placements in business and information technology disciplines, are paid during their placement. As economic impacts on employers began to escalate, instances where students were being asked to shift from paid to unpaid placements occurred, necessitating adjustments to their tasks to make the placement comply with Australian law. Modified processes all required adjustments to the WIL management system and included staff documenting, changes from a face to face to a remote/online placement, alterations of paid to unpaid placements, changes to WIL activities, changes to assessment or supervision and completion of onsite risk assessment for continuing face to face placements, including documenting senior level approval. These process changes ensured quality standards aligned to TEQSA and to RMIT requirements were adhered to and recorded in the WIL management system. This additional workload added to national, long-standing issues of workload for WIL staff (Patrick et al., 2009) and presented resourcing challenges that RMIT continues to grapple with.

#### INCREASED EMPHASIS ON PARTNERSHIPS: INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL

Aligning key central areas of expertise and ensuring co-operation across the discipline areas was required in a predominately decentralized structure to respond to the pandemic. This was achieved through the mechanisms outlined previously and will be continued through a newly implemented institution wide WIL management committee. A key focus of the business continuity management response to the COVID-19 pandemic was ensuring a pipeline of industry and community relationships

for future WIL experiences. COVID-19 was also the impetus for the development and implementation of an extensive industry campaign to promote work-integrated learning to university alumni and employers locally and globally to secure future opportunities

Proposals recognising the importance of WIL to support the Australian society and economic recovery in the post COVID era were developed nationally. The Australian Government announced a suite of reforms to the higher education sector that included a focus on measures to support institutions to “work more closely than before with industry to ensure graduates have the job ready skills and experience they need in a challenging labour market” (Australian Government, Department of Education Skills and Employment, 2020, p. 4). This proposal includes dedicated future funding to tertiary institutions to foster closer industry engagement including the provision of work-integrated learning.

## DISCUSSION

This paper outlines approaches taken by University of Waterloo and RMIT University to address the COVID-19 pandemic and mitigate the impact on thousands of WIL students. With WIL fundamental to both institutions’ pedagogy, strategy, and reputation, COVID-19 posed a significant threat which required both Institutions to take rapid action to meet the challenges and seize opportunities it presented. The crisis precipitated increased leadership focus, deeper understanding of WIL’s value and importance and of the complexity and interconnected elements involved (Sachs et. al., 2017). Although strong senior leadership of WIL has always been important (Cooper et. al., 2010; Patrick, et. al., 2014) it proved critical to achieve an agile, co-ordinated institution wide response and to enable the required change and innovation in both institutions (Kay et al., 2019). That senior leadership support is essential to affect change in WIL was reaffirmed.

However, differing organisational structures required strategies that both met the challenges presented but also responded to the institutions’ particular educational and national policy contexts. RMIT, with a predominately decentralised, distributed WIL leadership model, and a range of paid and unpaid WIL needed to accelerate governance and operational changes and implement new co-ordination mechanisms to achieve a consistent, institutional response. Significant effort was directed to building staff capability, mitigating risk and managing the complexities of both higher education and vocational educational course and professional accreditation placement requirements, particularly in the allied health disciplines. Implementing a co-ordinated, strategic approach proved less challenging for the University of Waterloo with a centralised organisational structure. This enabled a greater focus on innovation, including WIL program-based solutions to several COVID-19 challenges and a proactive engagement with industry from early in the crisis.

COVID-19 presented an opportunity for innovative approaches to be rapidly implemented in both institutions and for systems and processes to be overhauled and streamlined. Entrepreneurial elements to both institutions’ WIL programs were fast-tracked. Across Australia many WIL practitioners reported that COVID-19 had enabled innovation and flexibility in WIL (ACEN, 2020). The power of partnerships, whether between institutions or with industry or community partners, shone through as an enabler to formulating responses to the crisis. The COVID-19 context also created opportunities to engage with a broader range of WIL partners. As most organisations were working online, this appears

to have enabled increased involvement by small to medium enterprises in WIL (ACEN, 2020) as it has removed, in some instances, intransient barriers including resourcing and geographical proximity (Phillips KPA, 2014; Universities Australia et.al., 2015). Examples are cited of the broader implementation of telehealth opening up WIL opportunities for students in allied health disciplines (ACEN, 2020)

Both institutions' WIL programs are guided by quality principles and frameworks encompassing broadly equivalent quality dimensions. In order to ensure that the quality of learning was maintained, both institutions adapted curriculum, modified processes, managed evolving risks, implemented innovative programs, supported WIL partners and built staff capability in order to meet COVID-19 challenges. A key dimension of quality is ensuring student readiness and their preparation for learning during their WIL experiences (Campbell et. al., 2019; McRae et. al., 2019). Similarly, the adequacy and quality of the supervision and the associated feedback plays a critical role in student learning (Winchester–Seeto et. al., 2016). Efforts to address the challenges online WIL experiences presented in these areas, were made by both institutions within the resources and timeframes available. Whether the strategies and resources developed for students and WIL partners were adequate is not yet clear. It is evident that the students had a very different experience, what is not known is if that experience was less valuable. Could these online or remote WIL experiences, in fact, have fostered the development of resilience, flexibility and the capacity to work in online environments that will equip students for a future, more disrupted, world of work? The success or otherwise of that preparation, support and the consequential impact on students learning during these online WIL experiences is yet to be thoroughly evaluated.

Swiriski and Simpson (2012) argue for a slow measured approach, rather than a rapid implementation of innovation in WIL, in order to enable impacts on all stakeholders to be assessed and strategies implemented to ensure sustainability. Clearly, this approach was not possible during a pandemic. With WIL leaders and practitioners reporting benefits to changed practices, new WIL opportunities and a determination to carry some changes forward, it remains to be seen what impacts will emerge from this rapid change and what innovation will be sustained at both institutions. What is clear is that staff feel great pride in the creativity and effort demonstrated in the sudden pivot to online and remote WIL to support their institutions' WIL students.

In responding to this pandemic, the two institutions identified some key strategies that could inform other institutions in their future planning and reimagining of WIL. These include:

- Enhanced data collection and analysis. Remove any barriers to collaboration to achieve an institution wide collaborative approach to share and analyse relevant WIL data by key units including Alumni, Institutional Analytics, Registrar's office, Government Relations, Industry Engagement, Teaching and Learning areas
- Targeted strategic approaches using comprehensive data. Utilise comprehensive data on projected student demand and predicted economic indicators to refine strategies and develop more cohesive targeted university wide approaches to address WIL needs and shape WIL in the short, medium and longer term.
- Expanded diversity and innovation in WIL. Build an institutional culture that supports and values innovation, flexibility and diversity in WIL, embraces different WIL programs and

engages with a broad range of employer groups to enable inclusion of all student cohorts in WIL.

- Proactive strategies to plan for the next crisis. Develop and implement comprehensive risk management strategies with clear lines of responsibility and implement proactive strategies such as the Future Ready Talent Framework (McRae et al, 2019). This provides a research backed framework, tested during the COVID-19 crisis, to understand talents needed for the future of work, design and implement innovative WIL programs and enabled students to articulate their learning during their WIL and make sense of the COVID-19 situation to prepare them for their future.

As institutions grapple with this crisis and prepare for the future, implementing strategies successfully will continue to be reliant on the strong, ongoing support and focus on WIL by senior leaders to bring about the changes required.

#### CONCLUSION: RE- IMAGING WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING POST COVID-19

The disruption of COVID-19 had an immediate impact on opportunities for WIL students. Institutionally, responses were put in place to mitigate loss, maintain the quality of student learning and enable new opportunities to lessen the negative consequences of the pandemic on our students, employers and communities. Considering the longer term, an increased focus on the outcomes and impact of WIL go beyond employment and employability. In answer to the question: “what if students can’t find a WIL experience?” we re-iterate the importance that WIL is about more than a job, placement, or project. WIL experiences, and reflection upon those experiences, result in a range of important long-term outcomes such as career clarity, vocational self-concept, meaning, and purpose (Drewery et al., 2016). As institutions continue to connect WIL to employability, the time is right for re-imagining WIL and its role in contributing to a range of outcomes that lead to the sustainability of the individual, their career path and communities. Employability is one dimension of this. Other dimensions include values clarification, the development of capabilities that lead to adaptability and resilience and a more in tuned awareness of the needs of the world. As the future of work and learning unfolds around us during the disruption of COVID-19, one thing we can predict during these unpredictable times, is that more disruption will happen. Our obligation to our WIL students is that we are preparing them to be successful through this disruption and to be well positioned for the next disruption.

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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 2018 the journal name was changed to the International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning.

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. Defining elements of this educational approach requires that students engage in authentic and meaningful work-related task, and must involve three stakeholders; the student, the university, and the workplace*". Examples of practice include off-campus, workplace immersion activities such as work placements, internships, practicum, service learning, and cooperative education (Co-op), and on-campus activities such as work-related projects/competitions, entrepreneurship, student-led enterprise, etc. WIL is related to, but not the same as, the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training.

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.

The Journal is ongoing financially supported by the Work-Integrated Learning New Zealand (WILNZ), [www.nzace.ac.nz](http://www.nzace.ac.nz) and the University of Waikato, New Zealand, and received periodic sponsorship from the Australian Collaborative Education Network (ACEN) and the World Association of Cooperative Education (WACE).

## 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 was 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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