

Enhancing student success in virtual work-integrated learning: The critical role of mental health and wellbeing support

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Practical skills development is a growing priority for government and industry, driving the integration of work-integrated learning (WIL) into degree programs. While WIL is recognized for preparing students for the workforce concerns persist regarding mental health and wellbeing support during placements. This study examines a pilot series of online Service Learning Social Impact Project internships, embedding mental health strategies such as wellness breaks, check-ins, and mindfulness exercises. Researchers evaluated student satisfaction, effectiveness in an online setting, and model sustainability. Findings indicate that students quickly adopted these strategies, describing them as transformative for learning and engagement. They valued the active participation and wellbeing support, reporting enhanced confidence as graduates. These results highlight the need to integrate structured mental health strategies into WIL programs to improve student outcomes, particularly in virtual learning environments.

Keywords: Mental health, wellbeing, service learning, Wise-practice, online internships, social impact, innovative, authentic work environment, virtual WIL

Higher education plays a crucial role in shaping societies, with universities expected to produce “fully developed human beings” (Berry, 1987, p. 77). Citizenship is also seen as integral to university curricula (Sternberg, 2007, 2009). In Australia, government policy emphasizes student employability through work-integrated learning (WIL) (Tehan, 2020). One form of WIL, Service Learning (SL), integrates practice-based learning with academic and professional skills, fostering civic engagement (Mabry, 1998; Patrick et al., 2008). SL enhances personal and professional growth by immersing students in community-based experiences (Kiely, 2005; Mezirow, 1997; Schor et al., 2017). However, WIL and SL are not universally accessible despite their link to graduate employability (Jackson, 2013; Patrick et al., 2008; Pham et al., 2018; Purdie et al., 2013). Before COVID-19, WIL primarily involved face-to-face internships, creating barriers for students unable to attend physical workplaces due to geographical, financial, or personal constraints. While WIL is recognized as one of the most effective methods for preparing students for the workplace (Goulter & Patrick, 2012), students have raised concerns about the need for mental health and well-being support during placements (Gillett-Swan et al., 2018; Fleming & Hay, 2021).

This study involved designing a pilot series of online social impact projects purposely designed as a university-led WIL experience to enable multi-disciplinary university students in disparate locations, both nationally and internationally (Australia, China, and India), to work collaboratively with community partners to address complex social justice issues. A key element of the design was purposefully embedding strategies to support student mental health and wellbeing during the online WIL experience.

University-led purpose WIL (Valencia-Forrester, 2019) is one variation of service learning where the university leads, designs, hosts and delivers the SL experience with multiple industry and community partners for multidisciplinary cohorts of students offering a “wise practice approach” to work-

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integrated learning (Valencia-Forrester & Backhaus, 2018, p. 95). The model for this study incorporated innovative codesign sprints delivered online and was ultimately delivered to a large cohort of more than 650 students and involved over 89 community partners. Students at various stages of their degree programs, from first-year through to Masters, were immersed in the social impact projects online instead of face-to-face internships. Working environments are fast moving away from a life in an office. Schwab (2024) describes the Fourth Industrial Revolution as “characterised by a fusion of technologies that is blurring the lines between the physical, digital, and biological spheres” (p. 29). These Social Impact Projects were designed to put the ‘experience’ into the virtual WIL experience. Student interns, university academics, and community and industry partners collaborated in a hybridised fourth space (Calandra & Puvirajah, 2014) created online, to incorporate universal design principles and create healthy and sustainable workplaces for students that were both inclusive and sustainable, provided transformative learning and meaningful experiences for students, while supporting their mental health and wellbeing.

BACKGROUND

This article builds on existing literature on SL, virtual WIL, and WIL, and contributes insights gained from the experience of the research team, partners and students. It aims to explore methods for facilitating learning experiences that transcend geographical barriers, combining the professional advantages of WIL with the communal benefits of SL while creating a nurturing, inclusive, and interactive setting of virtual WIL designed to support student mental health and wellbeing.

Virtual Work-Integrated Learning

Virtual work-integrated learning (VWIL) has emerged as a crucial adaptation in higher education, particularly in response to the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This mode of learning integrates academic theory with practical experience through online platforms, allowing students to engage with industry partners and community organizations remotely. Virtual WIL offers several advantages, including increased accessibility for students who may face geographical, financial, or personal barriers to traditional, in-person internships (Jackson, 2013; Patrick et al., 2008). Additionally, it provides opportunities for students to develop digital literacy and remote collaboration skills, which are increasingly valuable in the modern workforce (Pham et al., 2018). However, challenges remain, such as ensuring the quality and depth of the learning experience and providing adequate support for student mental health and wellbeing (Purdie et al., 2013). Despite these challenges, virtual WIL represents a significant step forward in making experiential learning more inclusive and adaptable to the needs of diverse student populations (Tehan, 2020).

Service Learning as Wise Practice in Work-Integrated Learning

SL is a pedagogical approach that bridge academic learning with practical, real-world experiences. SL emphasizes community engagement, allowing students to apply academic skills to address community needs, thereby fostering civic responsibility and enhancing learning outcomes (Batarello Kokić & Kokić, 2024). WIL, on the other hand, integrates academic studies with work-based experiences, providing students with opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge in professional settings (Björck & Willermark, 2024). Both approaches aim to enhance student learning and employability by linking classroom instruction with practical application. Research indicates that combining SL with WIL can create a more holistic educational experience, promoting both professional and personal development (Furco, 1996). This integration supports the development of critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and a deeper understanding of societal issues, preparing students for future careers and active

citizenship. SL in Australia is considered one of several WIL models. However, it has increasingly become a means for universities to strengthen their ties with local communities through community engagement. Integrating service learning opportunities into a wise practice framework for WIL is based on principles of universal design, equity, and inclusion. A wise practice approach allows for “complex learning and knowledge transfer into real-world contexts” (Shin et al., 2014, p. 9). It fosters a contextual understanding of diverse experiences, including the practices and methods of First Peoples, various cultural traditions, differing beliefs and identities, and emphasises the importance of access and lived experiences. A model of inclusive university-led virtual SL, provides an authentic SL experience, available to all students facilitated by the university. Led by academic staff, incorporating industry and community partners students critically engage with the practice and experience of work while receiving specialist training. At the conclusion of their SL experience, students “reflectively debrief about that experience and produce a portfolio of work as evidence of that experience” (Valencia-Forrester, 2019, para. 3).

Student Mental Health and Wellbeing

The “number of university students with a serious mental illness has risen significantly over the past few years” (Storrie et al., 2010, p. 1). Mental health refers to a state of wellbeing in which individuals can cope with the normal stresses of life, work, productivity and contribution to their communities (Gregory et al., 2024). It is a state of mental functioning and relates to our emotional, psychological and social wellbeing, affecting how we think, feel and act. Wellbeing takes a holistic approach and encompasses “positive states of psychological, cognitive and physical being” (McNeven et al., 2024, p. 588). With this in mind, supporting students' mental health and their over all wellbeing while completing WIL is a critical area of focus for educational institutions. In Australia, higher education institutions are responsible for student wellbeing under the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021* section 2.3. Integrating work experience within their academic programs presents unique challenges and stressors for students. WIL provides students with valuable practical experience but can also introduce significant stressors impacting mental health (Jackson & Meek, 2021) making mental health support essential for their overall wellbeing and success. According to Smith et al. (2021), students in WIL programs experience significant stress related to balancing academic workload with professional responsibilities, which can adversely affect their mental health. Mental health also impacts students' readiness for WIL (Hay & Fleming, 2021). The transition from academic to professional environments often leads to increased anxiety, workload pressure, and self-doubt, particularly in virtual settings where social isolation can exacerbate these challenges (Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2018). Research highlights the need for proactive support mechanisms, such as structured wellbeing programs, mentorship, and clear communication, to enhance student resilience and engagement (McRae & Johnston, 2022). Embedding mental health strategies within WIL ensures students develop professionally while maintaining psychological wellbeing. Therefore, providing targeted mental health support tailored to the specific challenges of WIL is crucial.

Supporting students' mental health in WIL is generally thought to be through the provision of comprehensive support services, including counselling, peer support groups, and mental health workshops. Universities can offer these services both on-campus and virtually to accommodate the diverse needs of students. A study by Brown and Elliott (2020) highlights the importance of accessible mental health resources, noting that students who had access to counselling services reported lower stress levels and higher satisfaction with their WIL experiences. By ensuring that students have access to these resources before, during, and after WIL experiences, institutions can help mitigate the mental health challenges associated with WIL.

Gillett-Swan and Grant-Smith (2018) emphasise the need for structured wellbeing interventions in WIL through their WIL wellbeing models, which highlight the emotional, cognitive, and social challenges students face in professional placements. Incorporating mental health and wellbeing supports for students completing virtual WIL experiences is essential to fostering positive learning outcomes and professional development. Virtual WIL experiences present unique stressors, including isolation, limited peer interaction, and digital fatigue, which necessitate proactive strategies for student support. Institutions can integrate wellbeing-focused frameworks by embedding structured check-ins, peer mentoring, and access to mental health resources into virtual placements. Additionally, fostering a sense of belonging through collaborative digital environments and ensuring clear communication of expectations can mitigate stress and enhance student resilience. Drawing from Gillett-Swan and Grant-Smith's models, these interventions help create psychologically safe virtual learning spaces, ultimately improving student engagement, confidence, and long-term career readiness. This research project demonstrates that educators can design WIL experiences that include strategies as part of the WIL experience to support student mental health and wellbeing, and the following sections include reflections on the author's experiences designing and delivering the virtual service learning Social Impact Project Sprints

DESIGNING INCLUSIVE ONLINE SERVICE LEARNING EXPERIENCES WITH IMPACT

Originally designed as a small pilot project for 50 student interns to test the validity of an inclusive virtual internship space, the online Social Impact internships were created to have a meaningful impact, but also model appropriate inclusion principles and considerations, along with mental health and wellbeing support. The research team was asked to accommodate an additional cohort of 600 first-year education students who were unable to go on placement and, therefore, unable to continue their programs, as some internships are a prerequisite to progress to other courses. Such was the volume of students, and short notice, a second option of 'Observer participant' was quickly designed to accommodate students unable to participate in the sprints in real time because they had work and family commitments. The project team determined this was the only way they could accommodate all students. This required all of the Zoom sessions to be recorded, edited, and uploaded as separate videos for the observer participants to watch and record their own observations and contributions in their own time. The observer participants were then required to join the project teams and 'work' with the other students for the implementation phase of the projects.

The five sprints were conducted concurrently, with each project running one day per week for five weeks. Students collaborated with industry and community partners and self-advocates with expertise in digital inclusion, mental health and wellbeing, homelessness, environmental sustainability and empowering people with disabilities. Supporting student mental health and their wellbeing during the Social Impact Project (SIP) was very much front and centre in the design process. Methods to support inclusive practice, wellbeing and mental health were included in the facilitator's notes, as well as embedded within the collaborative processes.

DESIGNING FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING: CREATING A SAFE SPACE ONLINE

Part of the design consideration was that the researchers wanted to create and model healthy, sustainable work practices that support student mental health and practices to support overall wellbeing while also embedding mental health awareness and support throughout the WIL experience in an online environment. According to a survey conducted by Johnson et al. (2023), students who had flexibility in their WIL schedules reported lower levels of burnout and higher overall wellbeing.

Encouraging students to set boundaries and take breaks can further support their mental health. In addition to stopping 'work' and ensuring interns took regular breaks, encouraging them to eat and drink water, to get up from the computer and move around etc, interns were also encouraged to take time out to connect with natural surroundings in their vicinity as part of the internship structure. Regular pointers encouraging interns to reach out to project team members or official support services were integrated into the daily workflow. Open dialogue around physical and mental health was encouraged, and creating the third space to signify the end of the workday for interns was also identified as an important element within the online virtual Internship format. The third space between work and home was incorporated at the end of each workday, giving interns permission to log off.

STRUCTURING EXPERIENCES FOR IMPACT

While it was important to create an online space of exploration and openness where students felt safe and supported, the structure was important to provide clarity and scaffold support for student learning. The first orienting framework adopted is that of high-impact practices (HIPs), defined in the work of Kuh (2008) as active learning practices that have been tested widely and found to be transformative for a wide range of students. In developing the participation expectations for students, the design was influenced by Sam Kaner's Diamond model of participation (2014) and Locke's (1967) goal-setting theory, emphasising the importance of intentional, willful connection or selection of goals. In order to set students up for success the design incorporated SMART goal theory to provide a clear outcome students could achieve. SMART goal theory (Doran, 1981) is a framework to ensure the goals are specific and detail what needs to be done, they are measurable, so the achievements can be measured because the project is reported on and there is a budget and spending needed to be justified. The project's objectives needed to be achievable, and while there was an impetus in the students towards social change-making, they also had to moderate their expectations with what was practicable.

Working within a Hybridised Fourth Space Supporting Mental Health and Wellbeing

The concept behind these virtual WIL Social Impact Projects was to pioneer a framework for fostering inclusivity within virtual work environments, particularly in anticipation of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Table 1). These environments, which aim to be inclusive and fair, cater to a dispersed workforce and are characterised by traits such as collaboration, creativity, adaptability, problem-solving, and critical analysis, and recognise the importance of mental health and wellbeing. Given we were creating workspaces in uncharted territory, we were able to set the parameters for working in these spaces. Within the virtual platforms, we were able to facilitate language and communication to provide a sense of community among students, with a focus on reducing feelings of isolation. A study by Nguyen et al. (2020) found that students who used online mental health resources during their WIL placements reported reduced anxiety and improved coping skills. By leveraging technology, we sought to enhance the accessibility and effectiveness of mental health support for WIL students; and incorporated activities centred around supporting them while completing their WIL experience. As stated by Robinson et al. (2022), training programs that equip supervisors with the skills to support students' mental health can lead to more positive WIL experiences and outcomes. This support can include regular check-ins, constructive feedback, an open dialogue about mental health, and encouragement for students to take wellness breaks throughout the day. These supports were incorporated into the daily activities for students. Facilitators regularly checked in on group wellbeing, and students privately if required, mental health check-ins started and concluded each day's activities, and students were invited to provide feedback about how they were progressing through each of the sprint activities.

The hybridised space created for the Social Impact Projects was established through a tripartite of three digital spaces. The first space was a website designed and created for each project, specifically addressing the five issues and creating virtual shopfronts or community centres that would be present in any physical marketplace. These websites enabled a place within the public sphere (Habermas, 2020) that signified the issue and allowed for discussion and connections with the wider community outside of the internship partnership. It also evidenced the work completed by the student interns and the collaboration with community and industry partners for each issue.

Secondly, the virtual 'workspace' created for these internships was modelled on contemporary collaborative physical freelancer workspaces, promoted collaboration between stakeholders and created a boundaried location for experts and partners to share their lived experiences away from the public gaze. The workspace was created using Microsoft teams and involved building issue-specific sites within teams for each project. The infrastructure of the workspace site was created to replicate a face-to-face experience, emphasising connection, collaboration, and solutions with a keen focus on creating the 'experiential' aspect of a face-to-face internship within the online experience. Each team site had a coffee room channel to facilitate social interactions. The teams site created for each project was utilised in conjunction with the third digital space created through video teleconferencing through Zoom. Zoom was selected based on its better stability and its ability to integrate closed captioning and other accessibility features. The purpose-built Microsoft teams site and the project websites were audited for accessibility and this process uncovered omissions in adherence to accessibility best practice that was quickly addressed. The framework, shown in Table 1, provides a structured approach to the implementation

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology employed in this study is participatory action research (PAR). PAR was appropriate because it allowed for "a process of systematic reflection, enquiry and action about [the researchers] professional practices [that] sets out to undertake investigations that are socially responsible, politically informed and committed to praxis and social change" (Bellany, 2012, p. 12). Importantly, PAR recognises that we as researchers were also participants of the group under observation (Norton & Sliep, 2019), which was integral in allowing for the lived experience of the various stakeholders in the project. Qualitative data was collected throughout the project: facilitators completed daily reflective diaries, the students were invited to submit their own reflections, able to be submitted anonymously at the completion of the project, and students were also interviewed and completed surveys about their experiences. The team recorded daily reflections throughout the five-week intensive, and also a detailed reflection on the first Monday after the block of sprints.

TABLE 1: Framework for fostering inclusivity within virtual work environments.

Concept	Description
Inclusivity Framework	Pioneering a framework for fostering inclusivity within virtual work environments, anticipating the Fourth Industrial Revolution.
Environment Traits	Collaboration, creativity, adaptability, problem-solving, critical analysis.
Joint Efforts	Student interns, educational institutions, and local communities devising solutions for societal wellbeing.
Setting Parameters	Creating workspaces in uncharted territory, setting parameters for working in these spaces.
Intern Benefits	Gaining practical skills, expanding professional networks, understanding social challenges, and societal transformation.
Technology Integration	Supporting student mental health through virtual platforms, facilitating communication, and reducing isolation.
Mental Health Support	Online resources reducing anxiety and improving coping skills (Nguyen et al., 2020). Training programs for supervisors to support mental health (Robinson et al., 2022).
Daily Activities	Regular check-ins, mental health check-ins, feedback on progress.
Hybridised Space	Established through three digital spaces:
1. Project Websites	Addressing issues, creating virtual shopfronts/community centres, enabling public discussion and showcasing work.
2. Virtual Workspace	Modeled on collaborative physical workspaces, promoting stakeholder collaboration, using Microsoft Teams.
3. Video Teleconferencing	Using Zoom for stability and accessibility features, supporting mental health and employability skills.
Accessibility Audits	Ensuring adherence to accessibility best practices in digital spaces.

Note. This table summarizes the key elements and structure of the virtual Social Impact Projects, highlighting the focus on inclusivity, collaboration, and mental health support.

Data Collection and Analysis

We collected a significant range of qualitative information: transcripts, reflections, and debrief notes from each meeting and the students and stakeholders. The virtual WIL design enabled Zoom captioning for every session. Each video recording of each session over the five weeks (approx. 200 hours) was transcribed, along with the observer's written reflections and end of project student surveys to capture their reflections on their experience. Researchers then coded the data and conducted a thematic analysis, identify patterns and finalise the important themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Team members recorded debrief meetings and reflections during the five weeks, which were also transcribed. A survey was conducted in week five of the study. Ethics approval for the participant studies was granted by the Griffith University Research Ethics Committee (HREC 2018/857). All students completed a survey that provided written consent prior to their involvement. At the beginning of each day, students checked in to commence 'work' and selected an emoji from a range of emojis offering a

range of 'feelings.' After each mental health and wellbeing activity conducted at the end of each day, students were asked to complete a feedback form about how they were feeling.

EXPERIENCE DESIGN

The collaborative design methodology was centred around ethically engaging individuals with 'lived experience' and those who would be affected by or beneficiaries of the proposed solutions. This approach went beyond soliciting input from those impacted by digital inclusion in areas such as innovation, education, mental health, environmental sustainability, homelessness, or disabilities; instead, it involved them as integral participants in the design process. According to Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, learning occurs through a cyclical process of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. By designing virtual purpose WIL experiences that facilitate this cycle, students are encouraged to engage with real-world challenges, reflect on their experiences, conceptualise new knowledge, and apply it in practical settings alongside the stakeholders they are designing solutions for. This iterative process enhances students' professional skills and promotes self-awareness, emotional regulation, and resilience, which are essential components of mental wellbeing (Durlak et al., 2011).

It is important to note as participatory action researchers, we were mindful that some of the social justice issues we were exploring may elicit negative responses in the students based on their own lived experience. Therefore, we felt it was important to incorporate positive psychology interventions, such as gratitude exercises, strengths-based coaching, physical activity, hydration, time in nature, and mindfulness practices, as they have been shown to improve mental health outcomes and enhance overall wellbeing (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). By integrating these interventions into the virtual WIL experience, we could provide students with tools and resources to manage their stress, build resilience, and cultivate a positive mindset, ultimately supporting their mental health and wellbeing throughout their academic and professional journey.

Virtual SL Structure - Social Impact Project Innovative Solution Design Sprint

The sprints incorporated six distinct phases designed to support and develop the students' understanding of the complex social justice issue and develop their personal and professional identities and is represented in Table 2.

TABLE 2: Impact project innovative solution design sprint structure.

Phase	Description
Pre-internship workshop	Introduction to internship structure and overview.
Project launch/induction	Panels and speaker presentations, learning about the issue.
Understanding collaborative ways	Deeper understanding of collaborative ways of working with complexity and diversity.
Design innovative approaches	Utilize methods and tools to design innovative approaches, seek input, refine ideas.
Impact phase	Implement projects.
Presentation of outcomes	Present project outcomes back to community partners.

RESULTS

Student Response to Framework Structure

Initially, student interns attended a pre-internship workshop where they were introduced to the overarching structure of the internship and given an overview of what the internship would entail. This was to ensure students were well prepared to work within the hybridised fourth space created for the internship. Secondly, each project held a project launch/induction featuring a series of panels and speaker presentations including support services and people with lived experience, policymakers, and community legal organisations designed to allow students to learn about the issue and explore diverse perspectives. Students reported gaining a greater understanding of the issues after each of the project launches. An education intern reflected that the impact launch was an eye opening experience about the inequalities people with disability faced and that they “felt deep empathy but also motivation to make a change.”

Likewise, the variety of perspectives presented by the panels and speakers prompted students to begin thinking about ways they could have an impact.

The launch has been eye-opening and extremely informative, rising issues that I didn’t really think about prior to being included in this project. Coming out of the launch, I feel motivated and inspired to see where this project leads us. (Education Intern)

Each launch featured a Welcome to Country with First People’s Elder Uncle John Graham from the Griffith University Council of elders. The Sprint facilitation team supported and affirmed the experiences of people of all abilities, excluded minorities, people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual, intersex, and queer/questioning (LGBTIQ+). The third phase focused on providing students with a deeper understanding of collaborative ways of working with complexity, intersectionality, and diversity. One student shared that this subject was “completely different to

anything I have done before at university,” and that “It is so much more welcoming than basically any subjects I did there.”

During the fourth phase, students utilise a variety of methods and tools within their collaboration with peers and partners to design innovative approaches to address the social justice issue. Students are encouraged to seek input from industry professionals, experienced voices and to ‘listen’, refine their ideas and test assumptions. Students then finalise their ideas and project plans and move into the impact phase where they implement their projects, and finally, coming full circle, present their project outcomes to the community partners.

The launch program impacted me the most on an emotional level. I knew from my own personal knowledge bank that people with a disability often face challenges within their lives. Never had I ever imagined that an individual would be denied opportunities within their lives not based on their abilities but based on others’ opinions of their abilities. I am so grateful to be a part of this social impact internship and now more than ever, I want to be involved in assisting the implementation of a project that allows people of all abilities to be empowered, cared for, listened and respected. (Education Intern)

Survey Results

On day five, researchers asked students to complete an end of project survey to capture their reflections and students provided qualitative justifications for their experience. Including the reflections in our thematic analysis gave us insight on the meaning, efficacy, and future preparation that the internship gave to them.

I would recommend this internship because not only are you gaining industry experience for your resume, but you are making a real, positive impact on the community and people who are deeply affected by such an [emotional] issue. It helps you understand and work on your strengths and weaknesses as individuals and as members of the work environment. You also have the amazing support of the Service Learning team that guide you and support you where necessary, which is an amazing (and somewhat rare) experience. (Intern)

Over 74% thought a social impact internship project should be part of a university degree program. This is a powerful statistic as the students were affirming the place and importance of socially-focused experience to develop their capacity for future success and making an impact in the world.

Qualitative Data

In reviewing interns’ reflections, several thematic insights emerged and are captured in Table 3. Reflections highlighted concerns regarding technical skills and feelings of intimidation, particularly among shy and reserved individuals who initially hesitated to actively participate. These students expressed discomfort with public engagement due to their introverted nature, prompting the implementation of supportive measures such as private breakout rooms for personalised assistance. Many of these individuals only engaged with cameras and microphones when prompted at the beginning of the experience, indicating a gradual adjustment to the collaborative environment, however the majority of students had their cameras on from day two (week 2) onwards. Subsequently, in their reflections, they acknowledged the personal challenges encountered during this process but expressed appreciation for the valuable experiences gained, demonstrating a willingness to share their journey with future cohorts.

TABLE 3: Themes in student reflections.

Theme	Examples from reflection
Reaction to the lived experience stories in the launch	The feedback from the participants was they were initially overwhelmed but then completely immersed in their chosen topic: During the launch I experienced an overwhelming sense of sadness, that I had not once considered before in terms of accessibility in the digital world we live in. (Education intern)
Value of the keynote speakers and panel members	The keynote speakers and panel members gave me an insight to the gaps that are evident within society particularly in education and employment and how changes need to be made, now more than ever. (Education intern)
Self care in the internship	All students were invited to 'opt in' to complete a poll after each mindfulness session evaluating how they felt, and how they valued the mindfulness session: I really appreciated that these mental health sessions were not just someone talking at us about how important it is to engage in self-care behaviours, but actively engaged us and provided an opportunity to practice different techniques. (Student, Bachelor of Criminology and Criminal Justice/Bachelor of Psychological Science)
Tips for future interns	Students were invited to provide tips for interns participating in the next internship. The content centered on mechanisms the students used to remain focused, how to manage conflict and fatigue and how to push themselves out of their comfort zone.

Qualitative Information: Observer Feedback

The observer cohort participating in this internship provided similar qualitative commentary to the students completing the internship in real time with many appreciating the focus on mental health and “discussing mental health with such respect and care.”

The observer experience was really valuable as it provided me an opportunity to learn and experience a lot of different professional situations through watching the videos and in the project implementation stage that I otherwise would not have been able to because of my extremely busy work schedule. ... Personally, as someone with lived experience in mental health I think the projects are really important. (Student, Observer Cohort, Bachelor of Education)

Wellbeing Support for Students

Another key takeaway for learner support is the importance of the self-care space. From the survey, we know over 85% agreed or strongly agreed that the wellness sessions at the end of the Sprint day were helpful. The self-care sessions were formatted to offer wellbeing activities during the day, wellbeing check-ins before and after the session, debriefing at the end of the day with reflections on challenges, learnings and achievements, and discovering and practising differing self-care techniques to improve wellbeing. There was an increase in the understanding of self-care and improved

implementation of the practice. At the end of each mindfulness session, interns were asked to complete a quick poll about how they were feeling. Results were similar for each poll. We have included an example of percentage responses in Table 4. Interns described these sessions as valuable and validating and expressed wanting longer session times to fully immerse themselves in each self-care experience. The intern reflections became more insightful and demonstrated higher levels of self-awareness with continued practice. Polls taken at the end of sessions reflected the mood of the day.

TABLE 4: Mental health and wellbeing checkin.

Survey question	Percentage response
1. Feeling negative (i.e overwhelmed, stressed, frustrated, tired)	0%
2. (Blank)	0%
3. Neutral	7%
4. (Blank)	30%
5. Feeling positive (i.e calm, happy, excited, enthusiastic)	61%

Note. This table is one example from a series of polls conducted following the mindfulness sessions at the end of each day of the students' work-integrated learning experience. This table reflects 13 responses from 15 students during that session. Similar responses were recorded for each session.

Student Recommendations

We asked students to share recommendations they had for students working in virtual internships and we provide the following list of recommendations directly from the students.

1. **Workspace:** Creating a healthy workspace with comfortable seating, technology, and access to natural spaces close by. Make sure you incorporate strategies to support your mental health and wellbeing while completing your internship. It will make a huge difference to your experience.
2. **Interaction:** Do not be afraid to voice your ideas, people will encourage your ideas and will make your thoughts feel welcome. Speak up and have your say do not sit alone in the session be involved and integrate with your fellow interns. Most importantly, have fun with it! Ask questions, speak up and offer ideas as everyone is in the same position as you. Voice your questions if your confused others might be thinking the same thing but afraid to speak up, no questions are silly. Listen carefully and stay open to new perspectives.
3. **Routine and breaks:** Having a good routine is a good way to stay productive, taking ample breaks is essential. Take advantage of the breaks to move, have a coffee and water. Take regular breaks, stretch and move around when you can. It can be mentally fatiguing trying to stay focussed in front of a computer for eight hrs, so it is important to do what works for you to maintain your energy levels throughout the day. Do not stress, you will be able to manage the workload as the process is carefully structured and planned. Talking and interacting with other members is also key to success."
4. **Impact:** "I will continue to share our project to my entire workplace, family and friends. This project is so powerful!" "This project was overall quite stressful, but it provides a great opportunity to develop important work skills such as team building and flexibility." "I found the process of working collaboratively online to be a useful skill to have developed." "My

impression of the sprint series started out as an assessment for my university degree but after listening and conducting a small amount of research, a desire to make a difference took over.”

Industry and Community Partners Perceptions

In their comments, industry and community partners reported positivity towards the projects that were created, a recognition of the thoughtful, intentional nature of the work, and expressed enthusiasm for working. They praised the project for its impact and collaboration and valued the program’s role in shaping future careers and connecting students with humanitarian and environmental initiatives. The project launch was widely appreciated, reinforcing the importance of meaningful engagement in addressing social challenges. Dr Ben Gauntleat, Australian Disability Discrimination Commissioner at the time was the keynote at the students showcase of their work and said, “The projects you have created are thought provoking, diligently created and cognizant of diversity. Their effectiveness and their efficacy will be judged over time.”

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study highlight the critical support structures that contributed to student success in virtual WIL. A key component was the structured reflection sessions, which enabled interns to articulate their experiences, assess their learning trajectories, and consider the broader implications of their engagement in service learning. Reflection has been identified as a key pedagogical strategy in WIL that enhances student learning, professional identity formation, and career readiness (Batarelo Kokić & Kokić, 2024). In alignment with Björck and Willermark (2024), this study found that structured reflection encouraged students to apply theoretical knowledge in practice, fostering a deeper understanding of professional environments and the complexities of digital collaboration.

Interns reported significant improvements in confidence, professional skills, and interpersonal competencies, which enhanced their employability. This supports previous research demonstrating that WIL experiences strengthen student adaptability, accountability, and ability to navigate workplace challenges (Patrick et al., 2008; Pham et al., 2018). By engaging in virtual team collaborations and receiving feedback from industry partners, students developed problem-solving skills and critical thinking abilities, which are essential for future professionals in socially engaged fields (Furco, 1996).

Student Mental Health and Wellbeing in Virtual Work-Integrated Learning

A major focus of this study was the mental health and wellbeing of students completing virtual WIL. The transition from academic study to professional placements can present significant emotional and psychological challenges, particularly in remote learning environments where students may experience social isolation, digital fatigue, and challenges in communication (Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2018). Findings from this study align with Gregory et al. (2024), reinforcing the need for intentional mental health strategies to support student mental health and wellbeing in virtual WIL.

The implementation of wellbeing breaks and structured self-care sessions at the conclusion of each workday was a key success factor in mitigating these challenges. These sessions provided space for students to maintain their physical and emotional wellbeing throughout the day, and process emotionally complex topics, relieve stress, and develop resilience—elements that are essential for long-term professional sustainability (McNeven et al., 2024). Survey data revealed that over 85% of interns found these wellness sessions beneficial, echoing McRae and Johnston (2022) in demonstrating the value of structured mental health interventions in WIL settings.

Moreover, these sessions included mental health check-ins, guided reflections, and exposure to various self-care strategies, which enhanced student self-awareness and emotional regulation and activities to support physical wellbeing. The importance of embedding mental health and wellbeing supports within WIL has been reinforced in the literature, with studies highlighting how access to mental health resources positively impacts student resilience and engagement (Brown & Elliott, 2020). Given the increasing number of university students experiencing mental health challenges (Storrie et al., 2010), structured wellbeing initiatives must be embedded as a core component of virtual WIL.

Enhancing the Future of Virtual Work-Integrated Learning

Virtual WIL represents a significant advancement in experiential learning, offering greater accessibility and inclusivity (Tehan, 2020). However, ensuring quality learning experiences and adequate student support remains a priority. Research indicates that virtual WIL enhances digital literacy, remote collaboration skills, and adaptability—all of which are increasingly valuable in the modern workforce (Pham et al., 2018). However, ensuring that students receive structured mentorship, peer engagement opportunities, and access to institutional mental health resources is essential for sustaining engagement and long-term success in virtual placements (Jackson & Meek, 2021).

University-Led Student Support

The university-led Social Impact Project team consisted of seven staff: two academics, the Director of the Service Learning Unit who designed and facilitated the sprints and had oversight of the project, an academic with specialisation in work-integrated and online learning who co-facilitated the sprints and generated media, marketing and communication content for the project, and a communication officer, who provided technical support in the sessions each day, assisting with communication and zoom facilitation, recording, captioning, chats and data collation for the research project. Two video editor technicians edited the recordings each evening and these were stored in a secure data management system. A partnership officer liaised with the partners and community representatives. A part-time communication officer assisted with media, marketing and communication relating to the project, including email to partners, website stories and promotional materials.

Interns were introduced to a variety of participatory leadership techniques and collaborative approaches aimed at facilitating meaningful conversations, fostering deep inquiry, and co-designing impactful community projects within their respective fields of interest. These practices and methodologies draw upon established frameworks utilized worldwide across various sectors, including public health, government, social entrepreneurship, technology, non-profit organizations, and local community groups. They serve as versatile tools for exploring, expanding knowledge and skills, addressing complex challenges, and empowering individuals to collaboratively instigate positive change.

Browne et al. (2018) highlighted the difficult space in design and collaboration between academics and industry partners as being the 'groan zone', the uncomfortable stage where the design needs to be reworked with input from partners and the facilitation team that provided a "more systematic cross-field communication" which "can be operationalised through engaging in an ongoing and relational process of bridging" (p. 421). Browne et al.'s study focused on bridging conflict and difference to strengthen disaster risk reduction and recovery work. In this pilot project, the bridging occurred regularly when partners joined the zoom sessions and the interns pitched their concepts and received industry partner feedback. In many instances, the design concept was not accepted by the partners and the interns found this both confounding and disappointing. Basically, it was a critical step and being

agile within this space was a life skill the students gained as a result which will make them more adaptable in any work environment. As the other testimonials indicate, the students who got the most out of the process, were the ones who admitted they were taken out of their comfort zone. When they trusted the process they learnt about their coping mechanisms and received support from students to see the process through to the project implementation stage. One of the resounding themes of the feedback was the support they received from not only their peers, the facilitators but also the industry partners and their mental health literacy proved a valuable asset.

Technology Use

Using Zoom and Microsoft teams was fraught with internet connectivity issues. There were some students who had no experience online and these students needed a lot of support while the sessions were underway. Many students were completely intimidated by the online experience to start with and this meant extra work for the Sprint facilitation team. After the students became intensively engaged in the projects, it was clear their comfort in the online space was improving daily. As we progressed through the sprint, most of the student cameras were on from day 2. They became completely agile in swapping breakout rooms, using the chat facility and zooming in on time.

Cultivating Industry and Community Partners

The partners and community participants were brought into this project well before it started and were committed to ensuring this project was a success. A key to this success was the behind the scenes relationship building with the University. The importance of integrating industry and students in learning was an essential part of the success of the project. In addition to the impact on the students, we also recognize that there was industry impact, which emphasized the importance of integrating industry and students in learning experience.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS: IMPROVING AND EXTENDING THE MODEL

The Social Impact pilot, as an innovative sprint internship series, successfully provided a scaleable practical online experience for 650 students during lockdown, and supporting their mental health and wellbeing. The results indicate that this model is a viable solution for delivering internships in a virtual format. Future research and iterations of this program could explore several key areas:

1. Engagement strategies: The Day 1 launches were crucial for engaging participants. Future research could investigate the long-term impact of 'lived experience' presentations from industry experts on student engagement and learning outcomes. Understanding how these presentations influence students' perceptions of social issues could inform the design of similar programs globally.
2. Value of engagement: The high level of engagement from participants, industry, and team members underscores the project's value. Future studies could examine the specific elements that drive this engagement and how they can be replicated or enhanced in different contexts.
3. Initial reactions and adaptation: While students initially felt dazed and confused, they expressed gratitude for the opportunity. Research could focus on the adaptation process of students to new online learning environments and identify strategies to ease this transition, making it more effective and less resource-intensive.
4. Self-care and support mechanisms: The inclusion of self-care sessions was vital for supporting students' mental health and their overall wellbeing. Future iterations must continue to prioritize these mechanisms. Research could explore the most effective types of self-care

practices and their impact on student wellbeing and performance in high-intensity online programs.

By addressing these areas, future research can provide deeper insights into the effectiveness of online internship models and offer practical recommendations for institutions worldwide looking to implement similar programs.

CONCLUSION

The virtual SL Social Impact Projects enabled students worldwide to develop global citizenship, civic agency, and social change remotely during the pandemic. A key feature of the Social Impact Project was the opportunity to collaborate with academics, industry experts, individuals with lived experiences, international, and multidisciplinary peers in a single internship. The Social Impact Project also enhanced employability skills, aligning with the World Economic Forum's top 10 future skills, including problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity, people management, emotional intelligence, and adaptability (World Economic Forum, 2016).

SL Social Impact Projects, as high-impact practices, foster deep learning and transformative experiences by integrating academic learning with community partnerships. These projects help students develop professional identities and become agents of change. A supportive and inclusive learning environment is crucial for student mental health and wellbeing in WIL. Moreover, fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment is essential for promoting student wellbeing during WIL. Faculty and industry supervisors play a key role in this regard. Training these stakeholders to recognise signs of mental distress and to provide appropriate support within the virtual WIL experience can make a significant difference for students.

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International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning

ISSN: 2538-1032

www.ijwil.org

About the Journal

The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning (IJWIL) publishes double-blind peer-reviewed original research and topical issues related to Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). IJWIL first published in 2000 under the name of Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education (APJCE).

In this Journal, WIL is defined as:

An educational approach involving three parties – the student, educational institution, and an external stakeholder – consisting of authentic work-focused experiences as an intentional component of the curriculum. Students learn through active engagement in purposeful work tasks, which enable the integration of theory with meaningful practice that is relevant to the students' discipline of study and/or professional development (Zegwaard et al., 2023, p. 38").

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, student consultancies, etc. WIL is related to, and overlaps with, the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training.

The Journal's aim is to enable specialists working in WIL to disseminate research findings and share knowledge to the benefit of institutions, students, WIL practitioners, curricular designers, and researchers. The Journal encourages quality research and explorative critical discussion that leads to the advancement of quality practices, development of further understanding of WIL, and promote further research.

The Journal is financially supported by the Work-Integrated Learning New Zealand (WILNZ; www.wilnz.nz), WACE (www.waceinc.org), WIL Australia (www.acen.edu.au), and the University of Waikato (www.waikato.ac.nz).

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Types of manuscripts sought by IJWIL are primarily in two forms: 1) *research publications* describing research into aspects of WIL and, 2) *topical discussion* articles that review relevant literature and provide critical explorative discussion around a topical issue. The journal will, on occasions, consider good 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 including recommendations.

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 into how to advance the issue further, and implications for other researchers and practitioners.

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ISSN: 2538-1032

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