

Amplifying the voice of student-mothers in the quality of work-integrated learning.

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Student-mothers are in tertiary education and undertaking work-integrated learning (WIL) but they are not seen or heard. This article presents the findings from the analysis of thirteen qualitative structured interviews with student-mothers in nursing and teaching degrees at a regional Australian University. The rising presence of student-mothers in higher education is reshaping our understanding of equity and inclusion. A thematic analysis of interviews derived three themes of navigating placement preparation, experiencing placement realities and processing placement outcomes. Further consideration is required to explore how to identify student-mothers before and during WIL, how to provide support that meets their needs and create more personalized reflection and placement feedback while ensuring the quality and benefits of WIL prevail. Overall, this paper illuminates the voice of student-mothers in work-integrated-learning, provides a student-voice on quality and reinforces the need for equity and inclusion in WIL.

Keywords: Work-integrated learning, student voice, student-mother, equity and inclusion

BACKGROUND

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is a common feature of many undergraduate degrees and is known to contribute to successful outcomes for university students (Jackson, 2024a; Universities Australia, 2020; Zegwaard et al., 2023). The student benefits are varied and contribute to academic success, increase employability skills, advance employment opportunities, and strengthen career confidence (Berndtsson et al., 2020; Ferns et al., 2014; Jackson, 2018). WIL is an opportunity to practice the use of knowledge and skills acquired in study to the real world and consequently expands student learning. WIL is common across a plethora of degrees, however has prominence as compulsory in vocational degrees such as nursing and teaching (Kay et al., 2019; Patrick et al., 2008; Universities Australia, 2020). Current research and practice have been focused on the design and assessment of WIL and although this includes the student perspective, it tends to be more directed at structural aspects of process and success for all stakeholders of students, educational institutions and host organization. The student voice is a critical element and remains under researched in contributing to the quality design, assessment and evaluation of WIL. Research and evidence are required to illuminate the student voice. Integrating and valuing students' perspectives and student experience in the design, assessment and evaluation of WIL increases student engagement and can significantly influence future career directions (Grant-Smith et al., 2017; Jackson et al., 2025). The student voice has been identified as crucially important to include and when it does, it improves the experience for all stakeholders (Eady et al., 2025). Thomson et al. (2017) explored the role of student voice in professional and non-professional accredited WIL programs and found it was somewhat evident in accredited programs, but there was an absence of student involvement in program design and research. Interestingly, Bell (2023) defines student voice as encompassing three key dimensions: students actively shaping their learning experiences, reflecting and sharing those experiences, and participating in major institutional decisions. Together, these perspectives highlight

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a gap between the value placed on student voice and its practical integration within WIL program development.

Equity and Inclusion in Work-Integrated Learning

Equity and inclusion in WIL are contemporary issues of growing concern in universities globally. As the student population diversifies, there needs to be equitable access to and participation by all students. (Australian Collaborative Education Network, 2023; Garant-Jones et al., 2024; Tunny et al., 2022). In Australia the Universities Accord, a review of tertiary education and various reports from Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (ACSES) reveal and reinforce the changing landscape of higher education and highlight the importance to help graduates prepare effectively for the dynamic workplace (Bennett et al., 2022; O’Kane et al., 2024). Equity and inclusion for all permeates across many different student situations. In Australia we have five equity groups of Disability, Indigenous, First in family (FIF), non-English speaking background (NESB), Women in non-traditional areas (WINTA), Low SES and Regional/Remote locations. Student-mothers are a population that is growing fast (Andrewartha et al., 2022; O’Shea et al., 2024b). Student-mothers can be represented in all five equity categories and often are in multiple groups which compounds the issues of accessing equitable and inclusive WIL experiences. Student-mothers are already in WIL but not yet showcased and therefore calls for the inclusion and presentation of their nuanced experiences. Mackaway et al. (2024, p. 1) declares the “WIL community recognizes that equity, diversity, and inclusion is their most significant professional development need.” Godden and Hoessler (2024) concurs and highlights the issues of access, challenges and barriers and encourages the need to design for equity inclusion. Student wellbeing is of increasing concern in the current world with increased financial hardships, increased mental health challenges and stress associated with finding and completing placements (Zegwaard & Adams-Hutchenson, 2025). Hay and Fleming (2025) forefronts wellbeing as an important factor in WIL which can have positive and negative impacts on achieving student success in learning and career development and emphasizes all stakeholders need to be involved and take responsibility. Moreau and Kerner (2013) discuss how individual capacity of student parents vary to cope and navigate the challenges faced during the internship alongside their academic demands. Stresses of finance, family commitments, and competing demands are a great concern for health and wellbeing (Konstantinou et al., 2023).

Student-Mothers in Work-Integrated Learning Nursing and Teaching

Globally, women now outnumber men in higher education, leading to a growing need for female students to access work-related experiences aligned with their chosen career paths (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2024; OECD, 2023). This is supported by the Australian Cooperative Education Network (Australian Collaborative Education Network, 2024) report which indicates greater participation in WIL among females than males. ABS (2024) shows females are predominantly studying in healthcare and education related fields, and is assumed student-mothers are also predominant in nursing and teaching. Bogossian (2021, p. 157) states student-mothers are “largely invisible in scholarly research and higher education policy” a concern echoed by Stefanese Yates (2024) in America; Welsh (2024) in the UK, and in Australia, Szalkowicz and Andrewartha (2024). This collectively signals the need for research and practice-based evidence. Being a student and a mother is challenging and becomes more complex with the requirements of placements (Glick et al., 2024; Macqueen et al., 2025). There is some targeted research focusing on student mothers participating in WIL. Dickson (2019) found student-mothers in UAE faced significant challenges, including arranging childcare, and balancing academic responsibilities with domestic duties was particularly demanding during the placement. Findings by Bogossian (2021) into student-mothers placements from a range of study areas, received minimal support from the

university and this was compensated by family and peer support. Savage (2021) highlighted issues of advance notice and peer support for teaching practice. The support from the institution is crucial and significantly impacts the student-mothers' experiences of WIL. Clements et al. (2016) found nurses commitment and professional identity were impacted by the staff supervisory relationships. Ashipala and Natanael (2022, p. 6) in their studies of nursing students emphasizes the “role conflict” combining motherhood and studying. The financial concerns are evident for students completing placements, and the issue of placement poverty affects nursing and teaching disciplines, particularly impacting females and mothers, and particularly compulsory placements. (Lambert et al., 2024).

Quality in Work-Integrated Learning

The Global Quality WIL framework developed by the World Association of Cooperative Education (WACE) “provides guidance to educational institutions, host organizations and students for before, during, and after the WIL experience” (WACE, 2024b, para. 1). This framework highlights critical elements; structure for all stakeholders, focus on student learning, accessibility, and evaluation for effectiveness, equity and consistency. Quality in WIL requires many components to ensure valuable and effective learning experiences for students. Winchester-Seeto (2019) draws attention to the quality dimensions of authentic experiences, curriculum embedded, student preparation, support during and after, supervision, reflection, debriefing and inclusive practice. Other quality aspects include quality partnerships, mutually agreed policies and practices between educational institutions, host organizations, and students and the genuine integration and preparation for the workplace (Cooper et al., 2010; Patrick et al., 2008). WIL research continues to grow and demonstrates the pervasiveness of quality as a key parameter in WIL experiences for all stakeholders. Ferns et al. (2024, p. 371) emphasize the need for effective design and assessment and includes the alignment of pre and post WIL for “optimising outcomes.” Recent research by Eady et al. (2025) identified ten themes from a systematic review on student experiences of quality WIL: development, relationships, work environment, relevant work, evaluation, impact, reflection and debrief, authenticity, student attributes and program design. This was developed into a Reflections on Quality (ROQ) WIL model which offers 3 thematic levels of where student can influence quality: personal/relational (student has influence) programmatic (student has limited influence) and community/contextual (student has least influence). Students need to be involved in various aspects of WIL. While various stakeholder perspectives inform the quality in work-integrated learning (WIL), there remains a significant gap in research and practice concerning the inclusion of the student voice—an essential element in defining, shaping, and evaluating high-quality WIL experiences. This is particularly important with the continued demands for preparing students for the ever-changing workplace. There is a need to explore the WIL experiences of student-mothers and better understand how they experience quality WIL experiences, and how to include the student voice.

Research Questions

1. How do student-mothers navigate their way through before, during and after work-integrated learning?
2. Explore how to include the student voice of mothers in WIL as aligned to the Global Quality WIL Framework and ROQ model?

METHOD

A series of in-depth interviews were conducted with student-mothers completing a Bachelor of Education and Bachelor of Nursing degree. The study secured ethical clearance (HREC 92024/347) to invite student-mothers to take part in the research.

This study employed an exploratory qualitative approach to gain a deeper understanding of student-mothers' perspectives and voice from their workplace experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). As a result, this methodological approach is well-suited for exploring critical issues as it allows for an in-depth examination of WIL practice through the lens of students' lived experiences. The Global Quality WIL Framework was used to design questions to collect the lived experiences of student-mothers on placement. Structured interviews were considered suitable to explore participants' knowledge and experiences which provide rich data from authentic conversations (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017).

Participants and Recruitment

Participants were recruited from a regional university in New South Wales, Australia. The university has multiple campuses in both regional and metropolitan locations. Students enrolled in placement subjects in a Bachelor of Education and Bachelor of Nursing degree were invited to participate in the study via internal communication from the subject coordinators. Once students responded indicating interest to the invitation, a Participant Information Sheet, and Consent Form was sent. Locations and times of interviews were mutually agreed. Recruitment proceeded until data saturation was achieved, meaning no new insights emerged from the data. A total of thirteen participants were interviewed, which was deemed an adequate sample size as recurring themes indicated saturation. This ensured a representative sample of students and their experiences (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Table 1 provides a detailed overview of the sample.

Thirteen student-mothers participated in the interviews. Eight (61.5%) participants were enrolled in a Bachelor of Nursing program, while five (38.5%) were enrolled in a Bachelor of Primary Education program. Over two thirds of participants were studying their degree from a Metropolitan campus ($n=9$, 69.2%) and just over half had more than one child that they cared for ($n=8$, 61.5%). Stage of placement was shared where majority had completed a placement, with a few at the commencement phase, just starting or one waiting to be advised about the location of placement. One student identified as international, and another identified as indigenous. The information is presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Participant information of student-mothers completing work-integrated learning.

Alias	Degree	Location	Relationship status	Number of children	Stage of placement
Alex	Teaching	Metro	Married	1	Completed
Bec	Teaching	Metro	Married	2	Completed
Chloe	Nursing	Regional	Married	2	Completed
Denise	Teaching	Metro	Married	1	Completed
Elva	Nursing	Regional	Single	1	Completed
Faith	Nursing	Regional	Partnered	2	Completed
Glenda	Teaching	Metro	Single	1	Graduated
Heather	Teaching	Metro	Partnered	4	Completed
Indie	Nursing	Metro	Partnered	1	Started
Julie	Nursing	Metro	Partnered	2	Completed
Kelly	Nursing	Metro	Married	2	Completed
Linda	Nursing	Metro	Partnered	2	During
Maisy	Nursing	Regional	Married	2	Not started

Data Collection

Data collection occurred between December 2024 and March 2025. The interviews were semi-structured and employed the use of a topic guide informed by the Global Quality WIL Framework. The main elements of the guide focused on asking questions about participants' experiences before, during and after workplace experience. For example, 'did you feel prepared for placement?' and 'how would you describe the orientation you had when you commenced your workplace experience?' Interviews lasted between 40-60 minutes, were audio-recorded, and then transcribed verbatim. Details of interview participants were de-identified, and pseudonyms replaced their names. In addition, any possible individual or workplace identifiers were withdrawn from the data. All interviews occurred via video conferencing or the phone by the first researcher.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. The second researcher independently reviewed the transcripts, identifying data segments relevant to the research questions. From these segments, an initial coding framework was developed by examining patterns across the full data set. Corresponding excerpts were then extracted, with their positions in the data set recorded. Next, the codes were reorganized and grouped into preliminary themes, allowing for broad categorization. With consideration of the Global WIL quality Framework, the transcripts were re-examined by both authors to identify additional data and refine the coding process, strengthening the identified themes (Table 2). The themes were refined, condensed, and given names that accurately captured their underlying data.

TABLE 2: Process of analysis to determine themes and sub-themes.

Raw Data (Exemplar Quote)	Initial Code	Category	Sub-theme	Theme
I knew coming into doing the degree that it was a part of it, and if I wanted to complete it, then that was what I had to do. – Nurse Faith	Acceptance of placement as academic necessity	Understanding academic requirements	Placement acceptance	Navigation placement preparation
...it's crystal clear what your expectations are before you go out on placement. You're given your scope of practice, so you don't go into it blindly. – Nurse Kelly	Clarity of expectations	Pre-placement preparedness	Placement acceptance	Navigation placement preparation
I'm very organized... I had to start packing my bag a week before I went, get dinners ready, get kids school events organized, so that I was ready to go. – Nurse Faith	Advance logistical preparation	Managing multiple roles	Challenges leading into placement	Navigation placement preparation
I've had to organize accommodation, time off work... I couldn't have done this as a single mother. . . – Nurse Glenda	Logistical and emotional pressure	Pre-placement planning barriers	Challenges leading into placement	Navigation placement preparation
We get an understanding of the location a few weeks beforehand... but it would be nice to find out a lot sooner. . . – Teacher Denise	Late placement notification	Institutional inflexibility	Challenges leading into placement	Navigation placement preparation

So the very first day when you arrive, you have your facilitator. . . they orient you where what is, what to do, how things work. – Nurse Kelly	Structured orientation	On-site guidance	Support during placement	Experiencing placement realities
I feel like it was I arrived on the day, and they were like, 'get into it'... it felt like 'swim or sink'. . . – Teacher Chloe	Inadequate orientation	Inconsistent placement support	Support during Placement	Experiencing placement realities
I've had three really great (supervising) teachers... they made me feel really comfortable. – Teacher Heather	Supportive mentor relationships	Emotional encouragement	Support during placement	Experiencing placement realities
It's hard to do the 40 hours (of placement). . . I need to be balanced between the children's activities. . . – Nurse Bec	Time pressure as a mother	Competing responsibilities	Challenges of being a mother on placement	Experiencing placement realities
I had no idea how to manage being away from home for 3 weeks and seeing my son only 1 hour a day. – Teacher Alex	Emotional impact of separation	Parenting while placed	Challenges of being a mother on placement	Experiencing placement realities
You have the workbook... and the facilitator walks this journey with you. – Nurse Kelly	Placement documentation process	Formalized administrative assessment	Need to be signed-off	Processing placement outcomes
It's really just a tick sheet... you're either satisfactory or unsatisfactory. – Nurse Faith	Perceived superficiality of assessment	Lack of nuance in evaluation	Need to be signed-off	Processing placement outcomes
Because I struggle with it (placements) emotionally... I do take time to reflect on that. – Nurse Bec	Informal emotional reflection	Processing personal experience	Reflecting back on placement	Processing placement outcomes
We had to do a reflection at the end of each one... part of the workbook. – Nurse Glenda	Structured academic reflection	Embedded reflection tasks	Reflecting back on placement	Processing placement outcomes
As for feedback... basically you just tick boxes... but nobody ever comes back to you. – Nurse Bec	Feedback as tokenistic	Lack of feedback follow-up	Limitations of placement feedback	Processing placement outcomes
We had like a little lecture right after... it wasn't personalized. – Teacher Alex	Generic feedback channels	Lack of individualized feedback	Limitations of placement feedback	Processing placement outcomes
We didn't receive any sort of email... There was no section for us to evaluate the school. – Teacher Heather	Absence of formal feedback mechanism	Inability to evaluate placement setting	Limitations of placement feedback	Processing placement outcomes

FINDINGS

This study sought to explore the experiences of student-mothers in work-integrated learning (WIL) and extract the student voice. Three main themes developed relating to the participants' experiences, namely, 1) navigating placement preparation, 2) experiencing placement realities, 3) processing placement outcomes. Within these themes, seven sub-themes were revealed. These themes were informed by elements of Global Quality WIL framework.

Navigation Placement Preparation

Placement acceptance

Both nursing and teaching students demonstrated a clear awareness of the necessity of placements as part of their academic programs. This acceptance was often accompanied by feelings of excitement, commitment, and a readiness to apply theoretical knowledge in a practical setting. Many students expressed an understanding that placements were an integral part of their degrees, and despite the challenges, they were willing to undertake them to progress in their studies: "I knew coming into doing the degree that it was a part of it, and if I wanted to complete it, then that was what I had to do. I was fully aware of what it entailed" (Nurse Faith).

Both nursing and teaching students expressed a strong understanding of their roles and responsibilities before commencing their placements. This clarity, often supported by university guidelines outlining expectations, scope of practice, and professional conduct, appeared to ease anxieties and reinforced students' willingness to engage with placements: "...it's crystal clear what your expectations are before you go out on placement. You're given your scope of practice, so you don't go into it blindly" (Nurse Kelly). Such foreknowledge fostered a sense of control and confidence, making students more open and committed to the placement process.

Many students saw not only placements as a requirement but also as an opportunity for personal and professional growth. This perceived potential for development served as a motivating factor in their acceptance of and commitment to placements. While initial nervousness was common, students often approached placements with specific goals, which helped them remain engaged and receptive to the experience: "You place your own goals for when you're on placement. And mine is always to build my confidence because I need to build confidence generally" (Nurse Bec).

Challenges leading into placement

While many student-mothers accepted placements as a necessary and even welcomed part of their program, this acceptance did not lessen the complex logistical and emotional challenges faced in preparing for them. Students described the extensive preparation leading up to placements, balancing institutional requirements with family responsibilities. This included the careful planning needed to manage their multiple roles "I'm very organized... I had to start packing my bag a week before I went, get dinners ready, get kids school events organized, so that I was ready to go" (Nurse Faith).

Others highlighted the necessity of securing childcare, arranging accommodation and negotiating time off work were commonly cited logistical challenges:

I've had to organize accommodation, time off work... I couldn't have done this as a single mother because I would have had to rely on someone to be with my children. It's a big stressor to think about before you start placement. (Nurse Glenda)

A significant concern among student-mothers was the financial strain imposed by unpaid placements. Many students found that the reduced paid work hours during unpaid placements, created extra stress leading to placement:

Because my husband and I work full-time and I don't receive Centrelink, I wasn't really eligible for most of the scholarships, so I would still have to work part-time and do placement on top of everything else....We couldn't just not work as we still have a mortgage. (Nurse Julie)

In regard to the placement itself, student-mothers, particularly nursing students, faced significant challenges in securing placements close to home. Many felt that their parental responsibilities were not considered in placement allocations, leading to lengthy travel or extended periods away from their families: "I have spent 10 weeks away from my kids just to do placement so far, and this year I have another 9 weeks of placement. All of my placements have been out of town except for one" (Nurse Glenda).

By contrast, teaching students reported greater flexibility in negotiating placement proximity to home: "You could send them (placement team) an email and request a placement that is close to home... if you don't have a car, or if you can't be too far away because of (children school) pickup times" (Teacher Alex).

Both nursing and teaching students found the late confirmation of placements to be a source of stress, as it made planning difficult. Many students did not receive their placement details until a few weeks prior, making it challenging to coordinate family and work responsibilities: "We get an understanding of the location a few weeks beforehand so you can start preparing your life... but it would be nice to find out a lot sooner than two weeks before" (Teacher Denise). For many students, such delays compounded other stressors and often disrupted students' ability to arrange support systems in advance.

Experiencing Placement Realities

Support during placement

Student-mothers in nursing placements generally experienced well-structured and supportive orientation processes. The presence of facilitators and clinical educators played a key role in helping students familiarize themselves with the work environment:

So the very first day when you arrive, you have your facilitator, and you have your clinical educator for the ward that you are placed in. And they give you a run-through. They orient you where what is, what to do, how things work. So, it was a good one as it immediately made you feel more comfortable and less of an 'outsider' to the place. (Nurse Kelly)

In contrast, the orientation experience of student-mothers in teaching placements was more inconsistent, with some reporting minimal or no local induction upon arrival: "I feel like it was I arrived on the day, and they were like, 'get into it'... it felt like you had to 'swim or sink' when you first started which isn't a great feeling" (Teacher Chloe).

For nursing students, they generally reported strong institutional and on-site support during placements. The combination of educators, facilitators, and buddy systems contributed to a positive experience:

I thought my first placement was a good placement. The staff were very positive about education and teaching students, but they really wanted to give back to the students and teach them things while that you were on the job. (Nurse Bec)

Teaching students, by contrast, described varied experiences. While some students received regular check-ins while others had limited engagement from their institutions which highlighted the limited nature of university check-ins:

There were some check-ins (from the university), but they were quite basic. They were asking the teacher, if the student is progressing at the rate that they should? And then the teacher could only say 'yes' or 'no.' I just presumed that they would be more interested in my opinion or experience, but they didn't seem to really care about my opinion. (Teacher Alex)

Despite such inconsistencies, teaching students did report positive interactions with their mentors:

I've had three really great (supervising) teachers that I've been with. They're all really different, but they've made me feel really comfortable. To give things a go...Each of them would always give me some positive feedback and areas to work on, but never in a way that I felt not comfortable. (Teacher Heather)

Such experiences demonstrate that in the absence of strong institutional support, individual mentor-teachers were pivotal in providing emotional reassurance and constructive feedback.

Challenges of being a mother on placement

Balancing placement responsibilities with parenting posed significant challenges for student-mothers. The long hours and disruptions to family routines were a source of personal stress:

It's hard to do the 40 hours (of placement). I'm not used to working full-time anymore. I need to be balanced between the children's activities that they do for their special needs and support them in what they need to get done. (Nurse Bec)

There was also consideration of the emotional difficulty of separation from their children:

I had no idea how to manage being away from home for 3 weeks and seeing my son only 1 hour a day. So there are things that I didn't think would be an issue, but they were. But nobody really told me about that. (Teacher Alex)

Family support played a crucial role in helping student-mothers manage the demands of their placements. Many relied on partners, parents or family and friends to balance responsibilities:

Because my husband and I look at the dates (in the placement handbook), and thank goodness that we have the placement dates, because then he can look at his roster dates and try and take a month off as well. So it's not so overwhelming for me. (Teacher Denise)

For others, they highlighted the need of support from both partners and extended family: "My partner, luckily this time was able to help, and I do have a family network, so my mom was able to help. So in that regard, it was a lot easier than it could have been" (Teacher Heather).

*Processing Placement Outcomes**Need to be signed-off*

As part of the course accreditation standards, a key component of the student-mothers' work placement experience was the requirement for structured documentation and sign-off to demonstrate completion and assessment of their practical training. Many participants described the administrative aspects of placement as a formalized process involving workbooks, reports, and checklists that had to be completed for final assessment. As described by Nurse Kelly "You have the workbook, the placement workbook that needs to be filled and completed and submitted, and the facilitator walks this journey with you."

Such documentation underscored the compliance-driven nature of the placement. However, some participants perceived this as a rigid and somewhat superficial process: "It's really just a tick sheet...you're either satisfactory or unsatisfactory" (Nurse Faith).

Reflecting back on placement

Many student-mothers emphasized that reflection played a significant role in processing their placement experience, both on a personal and academic level. Reflection was often undertaken informally by students processing their experiences, but it was also a structured requirement embedded in coursework: "Because I struggle with it (placements) emotionally... I do take time to reflect on that" (Nurse Bec). Similarly, Nurse Faith described reflection as a daily, self-directed process: "I did that (reflection) most days on my drive home. I kind of thought about the day... I think every day I wished I saw more stuff." This suggests that while reflection occurred, it was not necessarily tied to structured learning outcomes.

At the institutional level, particularly for nurses; structured reflection had been embedded into the coursework: "We had to do a reflection at the end of each one... so before you finish on your last day, it has to be done....A talk with your facilitator and a written reflection as part of the workbook" (Nurse Glenda).

As for Teacher Heather, reflection was framed as professional development:

Because as part of the subject, we did have to do that assignment that was reflecting on how we performed in our placement and what areas we can improve on and set future plans...you're then thinking 'OK, what have I learned?' or 'what can I take out of this to become a better teacher the next time I go to placement?'

Limitations of placement feedback

Nursing students reported some opportunities to provide meaningful feedback on their placement experiences, although these were often perceived as limited or impersonal: "They asked for personal feedback on how they went in like educating and providing support and then was there anything on the ward that may have been or could have been improved" (Nurse Faith). However, others viewed feedback mechanisms as superficial or as tokenistic, particularly when it came to sharing personal challenges such as the experiences of being a mother during placement:

As for feedback...basically you just tick boxes and you can write a comment if you want...you can write it wasn't good or was good, but nobody ever comes back to you. I honestly wouldn't know if they cared if I was a parent...they never asked. (Nurse Bec)

For teaching students, formal feedback opportunities were limited with some participants describing the process as overly general and impersonal:

We had like a little like a lecture right after, and there was Kahoot where you write your answer and it appears on your lecture screen. We had a few questions like 'what did you find difficult?' or 'what would you do different?' but it wasn't personalized. It was just quite informal. (Teacher Alex)

Additionally, Teacher Heather emphasized the absence of a formal mechanism to evaluate their placement setting and to raise their challenges of being a mother:

We didn't receive any sort of email or request to talk about our supervising teacher or the school environment or how the school handled our placement. There was no section for us to evaluate the school or evaluate how our experience went within the school, other than just based on our professional development.

DISCUSSION

This discussion synthesizes the themes that were developed from the qualitative data of thirteen interviews, highlighting the unique perspectives of how student-mothers navigate before, during, and after their WIL experience and amplifies their student-voice in evaluating quality WIL experiences. The analysis of student mothers WIL experiences demonstrates a complex interplay of challenges and strategies that impact the preparation, the learning and the reflection on WIL. The following analysis presents how the three themes of navigating placement preparation, experiencing placement realities and processing placement outcomes of student-mothers relate to the Global Quality WIL Framework.

Before Placement

Readiness for WIL: Student-mothers expressed a mix of excitement and anxiety as they prepared. The anticipation of gaining practical experience was tempered by concerns about balancing academic, professional, and familial responsibilities. Many participants highlighted the importance of early and thorough preparation, including arranging childcare, coordinating schedules, and seeking support from family and friends. This is a research gap; what is the preparation required by student-mothers. Although WACE (2024a), Cooper et al. (2010) and Winchester-Seeto (2019) acknowledge the importance of WIL preparation, this reveals the lack of student-mothers' voice in the preparation for taking part in WIL. Our findings have further emphasized how students are concerned about their wellbeing, managing life demands during WIL (Hay & Fleming, 2025; Konstantinou et al., 2023). Furthermore, this uncovers a lack of sensitivity towards the diverse needs of students.

Identification: It is considered essential for student-mothers to have a choice and a pathway to identify as a parent, it is a significant aspect of a student's identity and is critical when considering work-integrated learning (WIL). It permeates across the before and during of WIL. Recognition of this identity should allow educational institutions and host companies to support access to WIL for this growing cohort. It reiterates the issues of lack of awareness and understanding as identified by Andrewartha et al. (2022) and O'Shea et al. (2024a). It is also in agreement with how the equity and inclusion needs must be considered (Garant-Jones et al., 2024; Godden & Hoessler, 2024).

Support systems: The role of support systems was a recurring theme. Student-mothers emphasized the need for institutional support, such as recognition of parenting responsibilities and clear

communication from coordinators. Personal support networks, including family and friends were crucial in helping them prepare and manage during WIL. This is consistent with existing literature on the importance of support for equity and inclusion in WIL. Support systems can be nuanced for individual circumstances such as financial and emotional support which could alleviate the pressures (Lambert et al., 2024).

During the Placement

Structure and orientation: Student-mothers spoke about their various experiences of support during placement, including that of orientation. There is a strong argument that student-mothers need a well-structured placement experience with clear expectations, defined roles, and access to support if required, so they can focus and maximize their learning, develop professionally and get ready for graduate employment (Jackson, 2024b). Orientation equips students with essential knowledge about the workplace and helps them to integrate effectively and contribute meaningfully. This is supported by existing research with designing WIL (Ferns et al., 2024).

While there was a clear distinction between the type of supervision during placement (Clements et al., 2016), such relationships are identified as a pivotal aspect for successful placements in clinical and educational settings. The quality of interaction between students and supervisors can greatly influence learning outcomes and the development of professional identity and personal agency (Ferns et al., 2024; Sugiantari et al., 2018). The alignment of structure, supervision and assessment offers a holistic learning experience that bridges academic and practical knowledge but there is opportunity for the development of students' self-awareness and confidence in their professional identity (Clements et al., 2016).

Student-mothers bring a wealth of life experiences and face various personal situations that influence their WIL experiences. Just like in a workplace, these nuanced needs must be acknowledged and addressed. The WIL experiences shared was mostly positive, however, for some it triggered anxiety, caused imposter syndrome, and increased stress levels. Tailoring support and resources to meet these diverse needs can enhance their learning and professional development and create a more inclusive workplace (Dollinger et al., 2023; Jackson et al., 2025).

After Placement

Reflection and integration: On completion of WIL, student-mothers engaged in reflective practices with varying success. Student-mothers need to critically analyze their learning and evaluate their personal and professional development during and after placement experiences. This is consistent with Winchester-Seeto and Rowe (2019), and reinforces the need for structured reflection to help all students integrate theoretical knowledge with practical application, enhancing their overall educational experience. Mostly there was awareness of integrating WIL experiences into their broader academic and career goals with varying success. However, there was low evidence of students' reflection on skills they developed and the challenges they had overcome, and using these insights to inform their future career planning alongside family demands (Trede & Jackson, 2021).

Assessment and feedback: Student contributions were limited to their assessment and feedback, this suggests a lack of agency, as students were positioned as passive recipients rather than active participants. Feedback mechanisms varied across study programs and placement locations. Generally, there was a lack of opportunity for student to give feedback to the host organisation or the educational institution and limited feedback was given to the student, as the focus was on assessment. It seemed

more optional and not sufficiently emphasized. Assessment and feedback are critical components of WIL as discussed by WACE (2024a) and Dean (2023). This present study raises concern about students providing feedback as well as receiving feedback. This final quote highlights the importance and value of including the student voice of mothers and reiterates the importance of identity and inclusion: "It's nice to be able to share a voice. Um, it's probably healed me a little bit today and it was good timing, but also, like, it's very empowering to be a student-mother and be that role model" (Nurse Linda).

Using the ROQ model to observe student voice and quality, influence is least in the community/contextual level as it based and dependent on the environment one enters to experience WIL. As indicated by Eady et al. (2025), the contextual level needs a strong foundation of structure. Quality can only be present if the systems and processes are appropriate and effective between host and institution, (Cooper et al., 2010) and the view of student quality can only be changed if students are provided with the option to give feedback on their placement and not just them meeting course requirements, that is, hours, assessments completed. The student voice on quality is currently lacking in feedback on the placement structure and systems. Students may have some influence on the quality at the programmatic level, as they choose to engage in the WIL experience, be active in a well-designed WIL experience but could be more if students are engaged in the design and evaluation of WIL (Ferns et al., 2024). Students can have most influence at the personal/relational level if they take responsibility in disclosing their caring responsibilities around personal development on skills and attitudes, increasing their employability and forming positive staff working relationships (Ashipala & Natanael, 2022).

In summary the experiences of student-mothers on placement reveal quality in WIL but also illuminate critical themes that impact their ability to navigate and reap all benefits from work-integrated learning around identification of parenting responsibility, appropriate support systems and further development on reflection and feedback. These themes highlight ways to improve the WIL quality. There are challenges in preparing for WIL, which instigates the need for identification and support mechanisms. Support structures need to be adequate at all stages of the placement. Student voices need to be heard to inform preparation and to include the experiences of student-mothers in WIL programs. The effectiveness of WIL programs is contingent upon quality design that encompasses institutional and host ownership and support student involvement. These elements collectively contribute to a quality WIL experience that will shape student employability and professional career readiness. Educational institutions that fail to incorporate a nuanced understanding of these needs may perpetuate inequities inherent in higher education access and success among student-mothers. Key recommendations are regarding identification, support systems, reflection and feedback practices.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE PRACTICE

The following are recommendations for future practice:

1. Identification mechanisms: Practices should be included to offer methods for student to identify parenting responsibilities with the educational institution and the host organisation. This needs to be determined in advance, possibly via information collected at university entry or at the time with students start a placement.
2. Guidance for institutions and hosts: Design and improve guidance for educational institutions and hosts for supporting student-mothers by developing policies that support equity and inclusion. Consider developing or adding to existing best-practices for WIL experiences. This guidance should offer support in the before, during and after WIL.

3. Support student-mothers: Make opportunities for building self-confidence, empower student-mothers in owning their personal and professional identity before, during, and after placements. Professional development and self-efficacy building for students preparing to go on placement. Student mother experiences should be shared more, invited as a student speaker.
4. Explore nuanced support: Recognize and address the diverse and nuanced needs of student-mothers by providing personalized support and resources. Consider financial and emotional support services and develop best practices for supporting all students.
5. Student involvement in the design of WIL: A diverse range of students should be involved in all stages of WIL design and be included in reviews of WIL as part of course reviews and governance requirements. Students need to be involved in the design, consider co-creation with students.
6. Review student reflections on WIL: There is a need for students to further expand their reflections on a WIL experience in how it can impact the alignment of current personal situations to future career opportunities.
7. Increase feedback from students on WIL: Current processes of feedback to be reviewed and consider the need to get more feedback on quality of placement from the student perspective. Invite and provide a method of giving feedback on their placement.

APPLICATION FOR ALL STUDENTS IN WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING

- There is a need for identification of diverse need, this extends beyond parenting responsibility and can include other marginalized groups such as LGBTIQ students, students with varied caring responsibilities.
- A diverse range of students should be involved in the design and evaluation of WIL to develop more equitable and inclusive WIL practices.
- All students should be invited to give feedback on the quality of their placement.
- All students should be encouraged to reflect beyond the WIL experience.

LIMITATIONS

A limitation of the study is the research participants chose to participate in this study, and this can indicate only a representation of student-mothers, those who wanted to share their WIL experience. This limitation could be addressed in future research with greater numbers involved. The study only considers education and nursing which has compulsory WIL requirements; future studies should include a larger range of study areas, across compulsory and optional WIL (Thomson et al., 2017). Furthermore, while this study utilized a sample of 13 participants, this aligns with qualitative research standards where 9-17 participants are typical in qualitative studies (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022), as predetermined sample sizes are considered problematic in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to amplifying the student voice of student-mothers in WIL from the disciplines of nursing and teaching. The findings display the need for student-mothers voice in WIL while maintaining quality of experience and benefits of learning and reflection. Our findings support the need for more equitable student voices in WIL literature, and this study has helped platform the need for access and support of student-mothers. The recognition of these multifaceted challenges and the design of interventions for student-mothers are imperative to foster equitable access to WIL placements in nursing and teaching fields. The findings are beneficial to share with students, educational institutions and industry.

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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 [WILNZ](#), [WACE](#), [WIL Australia](#), and the [University of Waikato](#).

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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 and conceptual* 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 and conceptual 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.

Good practice and program description papers. On occasions, IJWIL seeks manuscripts describing an example of good practice, however, only if it presents a particularly unique or innovative practice or it 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.

Reference

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