

Enhancing learner agency in work-integrated learning

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With an increasingly dynamic world of work, enhancing learner agency in work-integrated learning (WIL) practice offers opportunities to better support learners to find, create and sustain multiple roles across their lifetime, while addressing inclusion barriers to share WIL benefits more equitably. This research used appreciative inquiry interviews with graduates of an innovative, transdisciplinary WIL undergraduate degree to explore their perceptions of how program culture, design and delivery fostered their success in diverse work/life/citizenship contexts and reduced barriers for equity-deserving students. Findings highlight how an underlying culture of prioritizing learner agency supported learner growth of meta-capabilities to lead change in themselves and with others in diverse contexts through practices such as learners co-designing their own WIL and learning pathways; culturally safe staff/learner relationships; and meaningful assessments. The research aims to amplify learner voices to inform inclusive WIL scholarship and practice, and expand understanding and application of WIL self-authorship development strategies.

Keywords: Learner agency, vocational education design, work-based learning, capability-focused learning, future of work, equity

This research responds to gaps in WIL scholarship centering voices of students (Thomson et al., 2017), especially those with intersecting diverse identities (Bell et al., 2024) to inform inclusive WIL design. The research examines an undergraduate degree program designed to prepare learners for multiple roles, exploring graduates' perceptions of how program culture and design supported success and reduced equity barriers.

The findings identify learner agency as a powerful lever for equity outcomes and capability development for navigating diverse life/work/citizenship contexts. Agency here refers to the learner's capacity to shape their own beliefs, values, norms, ways of knowing (Baumber et al., 2024) and to take action to influence development, relationships and achieve their goals (Spencer & Doull, 2015), in a specific community, enterprise or environment. While Baumber's team explore learner agency in relation to external WIL partners, this research focuses primarily on the WIL educator/learner dynamic. The findings contribute to an emerging research field about learner agency, power and relationship hierarchies in WIL (Baumber et al., 2024), by identifying mindsets, practices and design features that can enable reciprocity and learner agency in an inclusive transdisciplinary WIL context.

Learner agency supports self-authorship as learners construct meaning-making structures, rather than uncritically following external formulas. Magolda and Taylor (2015) identify a 'crossroads' in adult development where individuals move through cycles of differentiation and integration as they navigate disorienting experiences, encounter cognitive dissonance and increasingly construct, listen to and cultivate their own internal voice, beliefs, identity, and relationships. Self-authorship extends beyond early adulthood, but deepens as adults navigate increasingly complex contexts (Gardner & Estray, 2017). Many personal and environmental factors affect learner readiness for self-authorship, so there is no linear formula. Too much or too little dissonance can facilitate or deter development, yet student

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development is more likely when significant challenges and adequate support are intentionally used in the curriculum (Magolda & Taylor, 2015). Caldicott et al. (2022) identify the key role of self-authorship development in WIL, yet question the feasibility of resourcing individualized experiences at scale, even as research continues to emphasize the need for tailored approaches (Lasrado et al., 2024). This research contributes evidence of the value of tailored approaches and ways to help address the real challenge Caldicott articulates.

The benefits of WIL for employability have been well demonstrated in research (e.g., Cooper et al., 2010; Ferns et al., 2014; Jackson & Cook, 2023; Jackson et al., 2025). However, graduates face challenges transferring skills across contexts, navigating lag between labour market change and curriculum, and managing non-linear study-work pathways (Johnson, 2017). The significance of WIL in enabling lifelong learning (Gardner & Estry, 2017) and reflective practitioners capable of self-efficacy, analytical, systems and critical thinking (Martin & Rees, 2019) is increasingly recognized. WIL fosters meta-cognitive and social capabilities to find, create and sustain meaningful work across a lifetime of changing careers, engagement as active citizens (Bennett, 2020) including for independent contractors (“soloists”) who must self-direct their learning and transfer capabilities across diverse contexts (Johnson, 2017, p. 39).

However the very success of WIL, both realized and potential, may inadvertently privilege those already privileged (Thompson & Brewster, 2023), if access, equity, and inclusion barriers are not addressed to meet the diverse needs of students with often intersecting identities (Lasrado et al., 2024). Identified barriers to WIL participation include financial hardship, disability, stigma, structural and internalized discrimination (Mackaway et al., 2024), remote location, caring for dependents, language, lack of cultural safety and support for students own lived experience, cultural knowledge and worldview (Valencia-Forrester et al., 2019). A growing body of literature identifies opportunities to address these issues through design of inclusive WIL for Indigenous (Eady et al., 2022; Te Maihāroa et al., 2021, 2022; Woodhouse & Te Maihāroa, 2022) and other learners (Lasrado et al., 2024).

Research highlights a range of enabling strategies for access, equity and inclusion, including fostering learner agency (Gamage, 2021), critical reflection on learners’ lived experience (Valencia-Forrester et al., 2019), flexible, co-creation of learning (Kay et al., 2019) in reciprocal mentor/student relationships for cultural safety (Jackson et al., 2025) and practical student support for navigating the student/industry partner interface (Thompson & Brewster, 2023). The need for ongoing institutional support, review and evaluation of WIL practice is identified, and for proactive professional development for WIL practitioners (Jackson et al., 2025; Kay et al., 2019). This research responds to the call for educators to engage in their own reflexive practice to unpack their positionality, power and privilege to create pedagogical approaches that empower disenfranchised groups and promote allyship (MacKay et al., 2024).

This research explores a learning environment designed on heutagogical principles (Mann et al., 2017a, 2017b), leveraging learner agency to grow meta-capabilities for navigating rapidly changing labor markets, while reducing identified access, equity and inclusion barriers. The research findings present the narrative voice of equity-deserving groups who participated as learners and co-developers of an innovative New Zealand qualification. It builds on iterative evaluation cycles ensuring learner voice informed program evolution (Malcolm, 2020; Mann & Malcolm, 2022). Doing research with learners, was one of many ways staff sought to enhance learner agency and culturally responsive practices (Henry & Patterson, 2022; Malcolm et al., 2022; Te Wake, 2020). A separate article from this research focuses on strategies for Māori learner success and Te Tiriti excellence (Te Maihāroa & Malcolm, 2025).

Gerhardt and Annon (2023) conceptualize the WIL field as inclusive of a wide variety of pedagogical approaches, viewing work-based learning (WBL) as a subset of the wider WIL field. Their WIL mapping matrix reflects increasingly fluid notions of professionalism and citizenship, requiring personal, relational and professional capabilities to function in global and local labour markets, communities and society. Their concept of post-technocratic WIL positions the educator's role as facilitating the development of learner's capacity to learn, review and adapt through reflective practice and to work within the liminal spaces between disciplines, reinforcing the role of WIL in developing learner agency and capabilities for life-long learning (CEWIL Canada, 2021) that can be applied in any life or work context. The Bachelor of Leadership for Change degree (BLfC) that is the focus of this research, provided for WBL for participants in work seeking a qualification and WIL for participants in full-time education seeking work experience.

Bachelor of Leadership for Change Program

This three year transdisciplinary undergraduate program was designed to foster meta-capabilities in knowledge, skillsets, and mindsets. Rather than operating as a discipline-specific degree with WIL components, it began with each learner and the change they sought to make. Across three years, learners built foundational WIL experiences, developed workplace capabilities relevant to their change projects, and implemented those projects, amounting to approximately 1,200 WIL hours. Recognition of prior learning enabled accelerated completion for some learners. WIL contexts ranged across business, environmental, education, health, social services, youth and community development settings.

'Starting with each learner' meant WIL was customized and co-designed with each learner, based on iterative cycles of reviewing their past learning, then implementing agreed development plans within increasingly complex real-world contexts. Regular critical reflection with program facilitators and peers in a community of inquiry (COI), before, during and after their work experiences supported learners to articulate emerging dilemmas, learning and meaning; to build portfolios evidencing leadership capabilities and critique progress toward graduate outcomes. Gamage (2021) discusses the significance of a community of inquiry (COI) for enhancing learner agency in eWIL, drawing on Garrison (2016), and Garrison et al.'s (1999) work. Here, COI reflects spaces for collaborative critical inquiry supported by teaching presence (as facilitator and architect of educational experiences), social presence (where learners and educators engage socially and emotionally as real people) and cognitive presence (where learners engage in ongoing reflection and interaction to explore meaning from challenging experiences and how to apply new knowledge).

COI presence also had an important cultural mindset dimension, based on the Polynesian concept of 'ako' (Morrison & Vaiolati, 2011). Ako means both to learn and to teach, reflecting a reciprocal dynamic of mutual learning among educators and students. Rather than being subject matter 'experts' or placement 'supervisors', educators were primarily facilitators of practice debrief conversations, listening for 'teachable moments' to introduce relevant theoretical frameworks, tools, skills, stories, guests, reflections or provocative questions to support learning from live practice issues stemming from learners implementing their development plans. A culture of 'ako' meant BLfC educators consciously used their power and positionality (MacKay et al., 2024) to guide and empower learners in growing their learning capability and agency.

Central to the innovative BLfC architecture were learning outcomes that learners needed to demonstrate through progressively building a robust assessed portfolio of their leadership contribution and capabilities evidenced from their WIL experiences to:

- show self-awareness of values, mindsets and biases
- articulate and apply ethical, sustainable, reflective practices
- think critically and apply relevant theoretical frameworks
- integrate an appreciation of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Treaty of Waitangi - a treaty signed between the NZ Indigenous Māori and the British Crown) for their practice
- create and maintain healthy relationships and collaborations in communities and organisations
- apply capabilities and competencies to enable change in a specific community, enterprise or environment.

For their final assessment they also provided a critical evaluation of their final year change project, and synthesized their learning by articulating their own professional framework of practice. Assessment formats include a mix of written and oral work, including presentations to their peers and finally to an external panel of assessors.

Individual course requirements scaffolded learning towards these outcomes. Learners were challenged to reflect on their lived experience: to identify their strengths, capabilities, how they learn, who they are, what they still needed to learn to support their future aspirations, and how. Insights from iterative cycles of reviewing past learning, development planning and assessment helped curate individualized, authentic, challenging work experiences and exposure to different perspectives. An agile core curriculum centred around conceptual frameworks and tools for personal, team, project, organisational and community-led development; strategic, design and systems thinking; cultural and collaborative competencies; leadership in global, national and local New Zealand contexts. Meta capabilities like being able to observe, reflect, adapt, learn and grow as project challenges arose were valued as much if not more than successful completion of initial plans.

The program supported 32 learners to graduation from 2018 to 2023, but lacked institutional support to continue during major vocational education sector change. This research aimed to capture graduate voices so others can learn from their perceptions of culture, practice and design features that supported success and reduced equity barriers.

RESEARCH METHODS

An appreciative inquiry (AI) interview approach was used to explore what the program looked like at its best, drawing on its strengths-based orientation and longstanding application to innovation and change (Reed, 2004). The research therefore focused on graduates who had successfully completed the program.

Purposive sampling was used to ensure voices of Māori (Indigenous people of New Zealand) and Pacific (people with Polynesian and Melanesian ancestry) learners and those with disabilities, to include a mix of ages and career stages, and to learn from both recent and earlier graduates. Graduates were contacted by email from an independent administrator and selected in order of response until sampling criteria were met. Sample size was also shaped by research capacity.

Ethical approval² and informed consent was given for one-off, semi-structured interviews conducted online via recorded video with ten graduates of BLfC in 2022. Three others responded in writing. Of the 13 involved four identified as Māori (M identifier) and three Pacific (P identifier), and the age range was from 20s to 50s. Lower identifier numbers indicate lower age and T identifies all other ethnicities. Six participants identified as facing specific learning challenges arising from health, neurodiversity and/or English not being their first language (D identifier). Time since graduation ranged from six months to four years. Interviews averaged one hour long, were fully transcribed, and checked with participants, who were also invited to review the draft findings.

Interviews were conducted by a BLfC teaching staff member known to the interviewees, and began with a brief period of culturally appropriate engagement. Interviews then followed a typical AI arc, moving between present and past lived experience to generate insight for future-oriented reflections. Graduates were invited to share stories about program impact, significant learning, changes in practice, and perceived contributions of program culture and design.

An inductive approach to reflexive thematic analysis was used, supported by systematic transcript review and coding (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to capture the range of alumni voices and experiences. Themes reflecting patterns of shared meaning were interpreted primarily from the interviewer's position as insider researcher. Literature review and co-authorship with colleagues supported further interpretation of findings and articulation of their contribution to WIL research.

We acknowledge our insider-outsider positionality and biases as researchers. The value of being insiders was established trust, program knowledge, which motivated a depth of engagement, analysis and practice application difficult for an outsider researcher to achieve. Insider risks were mitigated through use of a gatekeeper, critique-oriented interview questions and ongoing reflexivity.

As non-Indigenous New Zealanders, we the authors see ourselves as outsiders, without the same lived experience of inclusion barriers as our interviewees, yet committed to creating empathetic and generative listening spaces (Scharmer, 2000). We work within praxis-related research fields that assume knowledge about complex phenomena is partial, incomplete, biased and evolving (Davis & Sumara, 2006), yet value collective interpretation of experience informing future practice (Heron & Reason, 2008) and influencing wider social fields and structures (Mattson & Kemmis, 2007).

FINDINGS

These findings present the reflexive thematic analysis of interviews with graduates of the BLfC program. The analysis revealed three interconnected themes illuminating how learner agency was fostered and experienced, and in particular, the significance of (1) the program architecture supporting learners to articulate, apply, and evidence transdisciplinary capabilities; (2) staff-learner partnerships co-creating learning within an agile, responsive community of inquiry; and (3) the culture of the learning environment supporting development of personal, cultural, and professional identity and practice context expertise. Graduate voices highlight practices that enabled success for equity-deserving learners and supported development of critical capabilities.

² Capable NZ Ethics Panel, Otago Polytechnic, Dunedin, NZ; 18/08/2022, Approval #139

Fostering Ability to Articulate, Apply and Evidence Transdisciplinary Capabilities

Graduates perceived the design of BLfC architecture around reflective practice, authentic WIL experiences and meaningful assessments significant in supporting their growing sense of agency. These structural features challenged and supported them to step into new experiences; learn to value reflection, feedback and diverse perspectives; find language to name their patterns; and build evidence of their growing capabilities.

Graduates perceived their first assessment, a Review of Learning, as foundational in growing their reflective practice and critical thinking capabilities; deepening sense of identity; and clarity about their potential contribution. The level of critical reflection required awakened them to skills, talents, old patterns and to find new mindsets, assisted by “such an array of tools and frameworks which meant I had choices in how to view things”(T9). Yet they acknowledged this assessment was also one of the most challenging program features. Some recalled how they resisted the process and yet learned that discomfort was where “growth was going to happen”(M11). One learner described a “revolutionary moment [when self-diagnosed as having ADHD and] suddenly saw that pattern where every six months I would change career”(D8). Many graduates reported deep self-discoveries that became a turning point for their professional identity, career trajectories and their ability to take on different perspectives.

Authentic WIL experiences were co-designed with each learner to achieve development goals, growing context knowledge, project management experience, micro-skills or discipline-specific competencies needed and capabilities for scaling to more complex projects over time. WIL contexts and roles were diverse, addressing one or more phase of projects such as design and build of a multi-stakeholder industrial composting facility, product development for small business, improving transgender wellbeing support services, supporting wellbeing and educational needs of Māori and Pacific school students, health needs of Māori and Pacific communities during COVID pandemic.

For those already in work (paid or unpaid), there was a ready-made, accessible practice context for achieving their WIL outcomes. There was value for the workplace having “another mentor alongside themselves to work with me on an important project...[and for learners] entering in their first ever degree, that's huge to be able to do it that way. Absolutely huge” (M10). Those learners not already in a workplace needed to create networks and collaborations for their own WIL experiences as part of their learning. Some found it hard to find their way into practice contexts or to know what they needed to learn or where they were heading in life, and suggested that more structure and support, possibly akin to typical WIL placements where industry experiences are facilitated by WIL educators. Yet these same learners also valued the challenge to learn to shape their own pathway, finding that “learning is not linear”(P1) and “what's important is...not having a rigid direction and being able to identify where something needs to go... nowhere else can I go where that flexibility is such a thing”(P2).

While learners valued the flexibility to follow their own curiosity, the “space to come to my own decisions compared to being told what to do or think” (T9), to self-determine “how you engage with what is offered” (DT4), they also recognized that this freedom came with responsibilities for tangible, timely delivery on program requirements. Therefore the learning environment could never achieve complete self-determination. Educators needed to be careful guardians of qualification integrity, while leveraging flexibility and learner agency to reduce inclusion barriers.

The program's weekly online COI sessions were central to the learning architecture, designed to support deepening of critical thinking, reflective practice, analytical and relational capabilities,

engagement with diverse frameworks, tools, skills and practice stories about how change works. Graduates appreciated the wisdom from people from “really different walks of life from me,...weekly encountering of other people’s projects, challenges, learnings...[and] how empowering that is for people to be challenged to share, present and own what they know”(T5). They valued being exposed to new perspectives, guest speakers and a diversity of frameworks which supported the development of their critical thinking and allowed them “to see the patterns underlying all those challenges” (T5).

Presenting and responding to assessments with peers in the COI was experienced as both empowering and also scary. Learners valued their sense of agency: “having a voice in how the program works, reshaping it, negotiating things”(DT4), “the freedom to not have to give the answer the teacher was looking for,” (T9) and being able to influence the assessment setting parameters:

I love the reasonable flexibility around the way that we could present our learning, I think that existing models are very colonial. They’re very ableist, and ...‘my way or the highway’I was able to adapt an assessment so that I was still meeting those clear learning goals...but I was also presenting it in a way that was friendly to my brain and my situation ...[and still] learning certain academic skills that I needed to develop...year three [was] like writing an undergraduate dissertation...a lot of those skills and methods...you don’t usually get access to until you’re in postgraduate study. (MD6)

Graduates were increasingly appreciating the value of having to name and frame what is at the core of their professional practice at the end of the program. There was power in being able to “consolidate, name and get recognition of skills” (MD6), which added to self-belief, others’ trust in them and creating their own sense of “legitimacy without waiting for other people to give that to me” (DT4). Being able to make their tacit knowledge explicit was making their practice more intentional, focused and effective, with language to articulate the integrity of their professional practice

regardless of where I am, or what I’m doing, that is very significant and very empowering...[and] enables me to join the different worlds I work in. Suddenly there’s no walls between them. My work is informed essentially by the same values, the same philosophy, and so that has been a significant shift. (T5)

Thus, core program architecture centred around meaningful assessments and authentic WIL experiences that enabled graduates to grow and articulate their own professional practice framework and capabilities that would serve them in navigating multiple roles and contexts across their lifetime. Strong relationships between learners and program facilitators were also essential to understand the value and purpose of this architecture and how best to navigate, utilize and adapt it as necessary.

Co-Creating Learning Within an Agile, Responsive Community of Inquiry

Strong staff/learner partnerships were identified as a key success factor in supporting individual and collective learner agency and in shaping an agile, responsive curriculum grounded in critical reflection and collaborative learning. Navigating the complexity of this relational aspect of the program required strong staff facilitation skills, to listen, offer guidance and adapt curriculum offerings to what was emerging individually and collectively, to know when to hold boundaries and when to flex in response to diverse cultural and learning needs.

A strong message from graduates was how significant their facilitator was as their guide: “We never would have got anything done, if the facilitation team hadn’t been guiding” (T9). They acknowledged

this role as a “completely different skillset to teaching” (DT8): “waiting for the learner to figure things out” (DT4), “not rote learning...more like help when you get stuck” (DT8). Facilitators were seen as “open minded ... [facilitating learning] with my peers compared to being taught” (P2), “helping me see new patterns and pathways in my context” (M3). Facilitators “played a key role in growing my confidence, being alongside me as a whole person, pushing me out of my shell and being proud of my achievements” (P13), while reducing fear or shame. Few learners had ever experienced this kind of relationship before, at least in formal education. They affirmed the power of being actively supported with powerful questions, relevant resources “tailored to my needs” (M10) and “to just explore multiple possibilities” (DT4) and come to their own understanding of the best way forward.

Learners also understood that facilitators had to carefully discern when to hold boundaries and when to flex. One learner described this capability from her experience as an educator as having empathy, understanding, multi-tasking and being very reflective about their learners and their own practice – moment by moment:

When you talk about the teachable moment, I think that's intuition...[When something unexpected] arises, I'm gonna go with my intuition...with my puku (gut). That's where the wairua (spirit) is alive...as opposed to, I need to get this [planned lesson] done. So [there's a skill to] being able to navigate that space of what is alive and what is life giving ... within a system that is quite structured and ... [there's] criteria you have to meet. (M11)

The COI was a living learning laboratory around the value and complexities of building a peer learning community. Learners experienced the value “of collective conversations” (P1) and staying engaged with this “powerful time to reflect, even if the content was not resonating” (M11), while some preferred smaller mentoring groups where they found more commonalities. An ‘ako’ (mutual learning and teaching) culture requires a commitment to being in relationship, even when learning is uncomfortable or not immediately relevant. A COI only works if people show up. The honesty of this young learner reflects the variable attendance, and how shifting staff/learner power dynamics can also deepen learning:

It's almost a contradiction where ,on reflection, when I was in class I was learning a lot about systems and situations ... super beneficial and, like, a pillar in the degree, but being told to go to them would challenge the growth that I had to recognize [for myself] that ‘oh, okay, I have a responsibility to go to these’ ... initially realizing I'm losing out, then later realizing ‘I don't just lose out, I also get that others lose out ... because they might not have someone to interact with or be challenged by’ ... [But] if I was told to go to class every day I don't know if I would have got to that same recognition ... it's not the same change I don't think, as coming to those realizations on my own terms. (P2)

One of the significant outcomes of these agile, responsive (albeit complex) learning relationships was reduced barriers and positive outcomes for equity-deserving learners. Māori, Pacific, and neurodiverse learners identified that their sense of partnership with their facilitator was critical for their being able to connect and co-design learning, no matter what their culture or learning barriers. While the facilitation team was not as culturally diverse as staff advocated for, learners were exposed to “lots of different ways of learning and facilitating and working together.” (M11) Where Māori facilitators were available, this was highly valued by learners exploring the Māori side of their identity.

Māori learners said it felt safe to bring who they are as Māori to this space. They valued when Māori values were brought to life and felt these could be made even more explicit in the program culture. Non-Māori learners also valued the presence of te ao (worldview) Māori practices for their learning.

I really enjoyed the fact that the staff either had a really good understanding of te ao Māori (Māori worldview) or Māori spaces or how Māori learners work or I could tell they were genuine in their approach to their own learning ... A lot of the practice the team of facilitators used and how they did that sat really nicely with my understanding of Te Ao Māori ... It made me feel comfortable and it made me feel valued. And it made me feel that I could bring who I was as a Māori to that space. ... [it's] really important, that authenticity and that creating safe space. (M11)

Pacific learners valued the authentic relationships established with their facilitators in creating cultural safety including care, encouragement, honest feedback, “their patience with me” (P12), “breaking down the meaning of words ... making it enjoyable” (P13), despite gaps they identified in provision of Pacific staff.

Neurodiverse learners appreciated being “immediately seen as competent and able, irrespective of what neurodivergencies ... or what illnesses that I had at the time or what life situation” (MD6); “feeling that I could discuss neurodiversity openly, with somebody who had experience with that ... That set the tone” (DT8). Online delivery enabled access for some because they didn’t need to travel or interact with classes “in person, [which] would have just been really draining” (DT4). There was valuable learning for everyone around how to build an inclusive learning community, which some felt could be enhanced with more explicit coaching around working with neurodiversity in any context.

Online was seen as really hard for some, and yet for others online was what made learning accessible with health or financial challenges, work/family/community commitments, meaning they were able to learn from anywhere, at any time. The fact that online included synchronous, weekly interactive meeting by video conference made it much more accessible than only asynchronous self-directed learning. Having occasional in-person gatherings of learners was difficult to resource, yet was seen as very helpful for growing depth of learning, networks, relationships; catering to different learning styles; and especially important early in the learner journey. Despite resourcing and community-building challenges, the strengths-based relational culture proved influential for many learners in shaping not only their successful completion of the qualification, but also their own identity and practice.

Growing Personal, Cultural and Professional Identity and Practice Context Expertise

Program architecture and staff/learner relationships formed the foundation of a culturally inclusive learning environment supporting the development of personal, cultural, and professional identity and practice context expertise. The emphasis on learner agency and learning customized to their cultural and practice context helped build core capabilities which they were applying and adapting to find, create and sustain diverse work, life and community roles. Skilled facilitation was essential to hold the COI space with a wide diversity of ages, cultures, personalities and life experience, where there was enough trust and cultural safety to share sensitive personal and professional development issues, and to be stretched into new, often uncomfortable, learning. As one learner noted, facilitators were constantly navigating “how to bring out the best in everybody and enhance everybody’s experience while not detracting from other’s access” (MD6).

One key curriculum element that supported a culturally inclusive learning environment was the requirement for learners to engage with Te Tiriti o Waitangi and its relevance to their practice. No-one

could graduate without exploring the uncomfortable realities of New Zealand history and how that impacts any context learners live, work, let alone lead in. Yet learners can passively or actively resist this learning, especially in a program with so much learner agency. Graduates interviewed felt Tiriti learning must be a non-negotiable requirement and affirmed staff modelling of Māori practices and openness to always learning more, as key ways that helped their engagement. They suggested some experiential and embodied ways to weave Tiriti learning more explicitly throughout the program to support students to step outside their comfort zones, process their emotional responses and engage with different perspectives, so it “flows like a river and there is nowhere to hide” (P2).

One non-Māori learner highlighted how this learning needs to scaffold with identity work. Once they felt more secure in their identity, they felt more able to critique their own and others’ attitudes, had more capacity to understand others’ needs and became more open to Tiriti learning. As one Māori learner noted, we need to

make it relevant to who they are and what they do ... It's actually about people being able to see themselves in [Te Tiriti], being able to understand that [Te Tiriti] is here for every single person that lives in New Zealand. You are part of Te Tiriti whether you engage with it or not, it engages with you daily and it was designed with you in mind. (M10)

Managing inherent tensions between learner agency and growing essential capabilities like context expertise extended well beyond Tiriti learning, and required navigation by educators and learners alike. Learners were often highly motivated about the particular change they wanted to make in the world, but slower to critically engage with the broader social, cultural, political, historical and economic context within which they would exercise their leadership. As learner’s context expertise deepened, they usually became clearer about specific competencies they needed for effective change outcomes.

Learner agency supported their self-authorship and the social construction of their leadership. Outcomes were not just about having a qualification, but a dynamic interplay between their growing confidence, capabilities and openness to critical thinking which fed their visibility and contribution in different contexts, amplified by the increased trust and respect shown by others. Having the degree enhanced their “ability to open doors ...[to] so many opportunities that I didn't have before” (MD6). At risk of oversimplifying the diversity of learner lived experience and outcomes, the core messages from these graduates were about an experience of strengthening their sense of personal, cultural and professional identity, coming to new understandings of who they are, how they learn, think, see things, being more confident and competent in leadership roles and finding contexts where their skills and passion can make a valuable difference. Immersion in self-directed learning developed strong learner agency, expressed by one as a mantra/mindset of: “There’s no reason why I can’t do [anything]... basically everything is learnable ... that means the world is more open, more possibility filled” (TD4).

This strong sense of agency and identity supported their capacity for critical thinking, reflective practice and appreciating other perspectives and skillsets – summed up by one learner as “ako: stop being the expert and start being the collaborator” (TD8). Their growing ability to apply systems thinking was helping them defuse emotive situations, ask powerful questions and be more strategic. Their experiential, embodied and conceptual learning in their projects and the COI was deepening their understanding of “myself, how change works, how wider systems work, what it takes to lead, at whatever level or context” (M3). There was deep learning around “becoming comfortable with the uncomfortableness of change” (M11) and increasing courage to step into new experiences to expand their expertise and capabilities in diverse work and life situations.

Further, there was deep embodied learning about relational and collaborative capabilities from their facilitators' different styles of teaching, which many acknowledged as influencing their leadership style. They were now modelling honest, positive, transparent communication, patience and flexibility to support learning and growth in the teams they were working with; shifting from trying to "fix things *for* people [to] ... work *with* people" (DT8); seeing their role more as a coach, mentor or facilitator, able to "facilitate really meaningful educational experiences and learning spaces" (T5). These examples give a glimpse of how Māori, Pacific, neurodiverse and other graduates are embodying their leadership capabilities beyond the program and empowering others to have agency too.

DISCUSSION

Learner agency emerged as a central theme underpinning the program architecture, relationships and culture which graduates perceived as contributing to their success and reducing equity barriers. In this discussion we acknowledge some inherent tensions in delivering such empowering pedagogies, let alone at scale, and where further research could assist. Regardless of the program's viability within current system constraints, we argue there are mindsets, micro-practices and design features that can be applied more widely in WIL, based on learning from this educational innovation.

In BLfC, learners grew their agency, identity, capacity and capabilities through co-designing, implementing and reflecting on their own workplace/community partnerships and projects. The value of enhanced learner agency in this program is demonstrated through how many of the access, equity and inclusion barriers identified in WIL research were overcome when learners co-design, initiate and implement their own WIL experiences with appropriate support from educators and COI collaborative learning spaces. BLfC graduates' perspectives add insight to Baumber et al.'s (2024) partnership model by identifying the impact of shifting WIL power and relationship hierarchies towards enabling learners to become drivers and change agents, and tertiary educators and industry partners becoming mentors and facilitators of mutual learning.

The WIL practices, assessments and mindsets applied supported learners to develop, articulate and evidence core transferable, transdisciplinary capabilities identified as essential for professionals who know who they are and how to be boundary spanners, working across disciplines and systems (Gardner & Estray, 2017). This learning environment provided an immersion experience in wayfinding leadership (Spiller et al., 2015), where graduates learned to shape their own pathway, that "everything is learnable," setting strong foundations for them to learn, innovate and adapt to rapid change in their workplaces and in their personal, cultural and community contexts.

Graduates also shed light on three inherent tensions that WIL educators need to navigate when enhancing learner agency in WIL. Educators are challenged to provide appropriate cultural safety and support alongside a necessary level of dissonance and discomfort. Not all learners are ready to embrace the challenges and opportunities of self-authorship. Institutions are also challenged to see opportunities and not just the risks that come with learner agency and an equity lens to innovation.

Firstly, enhancing learner agency and capabilities for self-directed learning requires balancing flexibility with upholding non-negotiable values around academic integrity, cultural safety and collective learning. Educators are challenged to let go some of their power, privilege and control of learner journeys (MacKay et al., 2024), shifting from 'expert teacher' to an 'ako' mindset (Morrison & Vaiotei, 2011). Educators' facilitation/mentoring capabilities (Carpenter & Ker, 2021; Ker, 2017) are critical in creating cultural safety, walking alongside learners in co-design of WIL plans and projects, and as they process disorienting dilemmas and cognitive dissonance encounters (Magolda & Taylor,

2015) to increasingly construct their authentic identities, worldview, professional relationships and capabilities. WIL educators are constantly discerning an appropriate mix of adequate support for each learner's pathway and a necessary level of discomfort required to support self-authorship, let alone collective accountability to their COI peers, program values and assessment requirements. Staff professional development and collegial team learning are critical for supporting WIL educators navigating the complexities of the teaching, social, cognitive and cultural presence required of them to empower learners to address barriers to their learning.

A second tension lies in varying levels of learner readiness to engage with necessary foundations of self-awareness, self-management, critical reflection and identity development that support momentum for self-authorship and learner agency. The diversity of ages, cultures and life/work experiences within the BLfC COI provided valuable peer and staff role modelling and support for those yet to fully understand the value of uncomfortable learning experiences that are part of the self-authorship journey. Such diversity and awareness can be intentionally supported through program entry criteria and induction processes. Curriculum and assessment tasks can also support students to find and name the uniqueness they offer (Lucas et al., 2022), grounded in their cultural identity and aspirations which are foundational for professional/work identity, especially for Māori (Reid & Dawes, 2022) and Pacific students (Hay & Mafile'o, 2022). A program culture of 'ako' (mutual learning and teaching) positions students and staff as mutual learners engaging with different ways of knowing, ways of being and cultural identity development, which Lucas et al. (2022) identify as often overlooked elements of WIL employability development. The identified BLfC design success factors show how Caldicott et al.'s (2022) WIL self-authorship development model can be applied across an entire undergraduate degree and enhanced by a COI for peer interactions, meaning-making and exposure to different perspectives, supported by WIL educators as mentors/facilitators of collaborative learning. More learner responsibility for organizing WIL experiences and more use of COI could help address the real issue Caldicott raises about the feasibility of resourcing individualized WIL experiences for larger programs.

Thirdly, another tension lies in securing adequate institutional support and resourcing (Jackson et al., 2025; Kay et al., 2019). The positive outcomes achieved for Māori and Pacific learners for whom traditional education models have often failed (Taumata Aronui, 2022) are surprising given the under-resourcing for Māori and Pacific staff on this program, yet suggest that a strong focus on learner agency, identity and capability development for each learners' context, supported learners' cultural safety, ability to explore cultural knowledge and navigate both their cultural and professional worlds. Resourcing for more culturally diverse staff and stronger iwi/hapū (tribe/subtribe) relationships would be essential in taking this approach to scale (Eady et al., 2022; Te Maihāroa et al., 2022). While the accessibility of online learning addressed a number of identified barriers for equity deserving students (Lewis & Burley, 2024), these same learners also affirmed the significance of in-person group experiences, which came with their own resourcing challenges. Investment in learner relationships with staff and their peers in at least one annual in-person learning event reaps significant benefits in deepening peer to peer learning and social presence needed for a successful COI (Gamage, 2021). This program's emphasis on developmental evaluation (Mann & Malcolm, 2022) throughout and beyond its short lifespan has supported an agile facilitator-learner and peer-peer 'ako' (mutual learning and teaching) approach for ongoing learning and institutional risk management. Learner-centred WIL practices are time and resource intensive, and their applicability at scale needs more research. Institutional leadership support is crucial for practical experimentation (Kay et al., 2019), and we hope this research evidence of the value of tailored WIL experiences may assist future programs to sustain institutional support to grow to larger scale.

Further research of industry/employer experience of this approach would be useful, possibly through further developmental evaluation of the BLfC approach (Mann & Malcolm, 2022) to work with industry/iwi/hapū/community partners and a learner cohort on a particular 'wicked problem' or theme. While there was only a small BLfC program intake over its short lifespan, due to being new, and therefore vulnerable at a time of major institutional change, its demise catalyzed the authors to harvest these rich learnings from graduates who were active co-designers of this program, for others to apply in different contexts – whether as mindsets, micro-practices or macro-rethinking for inclusive WIL delivery. We hope this research inspires more such evaluated experiments to support needs identified by Bell et al. (2024) for more research and practice applying an equity lens to the study and conceptualisation of inclusive, co-designed online WIL, its impacts on professional identity and graduate outcomes in different shapes and formats.

CONCLUSION

BLfC catered to a diverse age, gender and cultural mix of learners in paid work, active citizenship roles and full-time education, providing a transdisciplinary learning environment rich in peer learning opportunities. Graduates identified unique qualities of this program that responded to their learning needs in ways that they had not previously experienced or found possible in undergraduate study. The graduate stories provide insight about how customized WIL learning approaches can meet learners wherever they are, leveraging learner agency to co-design their study pathway, learning environment and address equity barriers. This research contributes to understanding how WIL practice can support students to develop their personal, professional and cultural identity and meta-capabilities for navigating a lifetime of learning, uncertainty and change. The research identifies possible ways to address the feasibility of resourcing individualized WIL experiences at scale, and to support self-authorship through enhancing learner responsibility for organizing their WIL initiatives, facilitating more peer learning interactions in COI and meaningful assessments with an explicit focus on learning and growth. Key drivers for enhancing learner agency include the potential identified for supporting better outcomes for equity-deserving learners, and enhanced employability capabilities for an increasingly dynamic and diverse world of work.

Disclosure of the Use of GenAI

No GenAI was used in this research or the writing of this manuscript.

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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.

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Reference

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