

A qualitative study of the employability perspectives of international students engaged in a tailored non-placement work-integrated learning unit

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International students often encounter difficulty securing employment on graduation in Australia. This qualitative study explores the perceptions of international postgraduate students of their employability during their engagement in a tailored non-placement work-integrated learning (WIL) unit at an Australian university. Four focus groups (students n=31) were held between 2022 and 2024. Clarke's Student Employability Framework, which applies an individual and sociocultural lens to student employability, informed the unit design and data interpretation. Findings revealed initial incongruence between student and university perceptions of employability. These students reported aspects of the unit that strengthened their perceptions of their own employability including explicit, real-world discussions, a strengths-based approach, and practical considerations in assessment design and creation of tangible outputs. The study also highlights the outstanding need for accessible approaches to placement WIL for international students, and the impact of the fluctuating wider political environment on international graduate employability in Australia.

Keywords: Work-integrated learning, employability, international students, non-placement, postgraduate

International graduates are a valuable resource to Australian society, the economy, and industry relations. Despite this, many international students face difficulties in securing relevant employment in Australia on graduation. Evidence to guide initiatives to support international student employability is lacking in the published literature (Dean et al., 2024). This paper is the first to report on the employability perspectives of international students using a holistic approach that considers individual student attributes, student capital, and wider political and structural influences, through Clarke's student employability framework (Clarke, 2017). It presents findings from focus groups with student participants, revealing the individual, sociocultural influences on these perspectives, and how these perspectives altered during their engagement in a non-placement work-integrated learning (WIL) Unit, (with 'unit' describing a discreet module of learning within a degree curriculum, sometimes referred to as a 'module'). It highlights the initial incongruence between the expectations and perceptions of international students around their employability with their Australian host university, and goes on to highlight aspects of the Unit that facilitated the alignment and enhancement of the students' employability perceptions.

BACKGROUND

International higher education students provide Australia with significant financial, social, and commercial advantages (Universities Australia, 2025). Classed as Australia's second largest export, international higher education is currently valued at \$48 billion per annum (Universities Australia, 2025). The education and employment of international graduates strengthen global cooperation, drive international trade, and enrich Australia's cultural and social landscape. International students are also

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an important source of future skilled graduates in areas facing long-term workforce shortages, such as the health sciences (Australian Government, 2021).

Many international students are attracted to Australia by the expectation of future employment in their host country (Blackmore et al., 2014). In reality, full-time employment of international postgraduate coursework students in Australia is low, with 2022 figures at 57.9%, compared to 86% for domestic peers. International graduates are also less likely to be employed in professional and managerial positions (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, 2023). In an increasingly competitive global student market, the Australian Government recognizes that strengthening the international student experience and outcomes is crucial (Australian Government, 2021). Universities keen to attract this lucrative group of students are increasingly aware of the importance of international student graduate employment rates, both to their reputation and attractiveness to potential future students (Gilbert et al., 2022). The aim of this study was to understand international Master of Public Health students' perspectives of their employability during their engagement with a tailored employability unit. The study applied Clarke's Student Employability Framework (2017) to understand the influences of 1) the individual student and wider socio-cultural factors, and 2) the students' engagement in the Unit.

The Concept of Graduate Employability

Higher education thinking has shifted focus from strategies to secure postgraduate work to activities that enhance lifelong employability skills, informed by the need for graduates equipped with skills to adapt within a volatile, evolving, global job market (Dean et al., 2024).

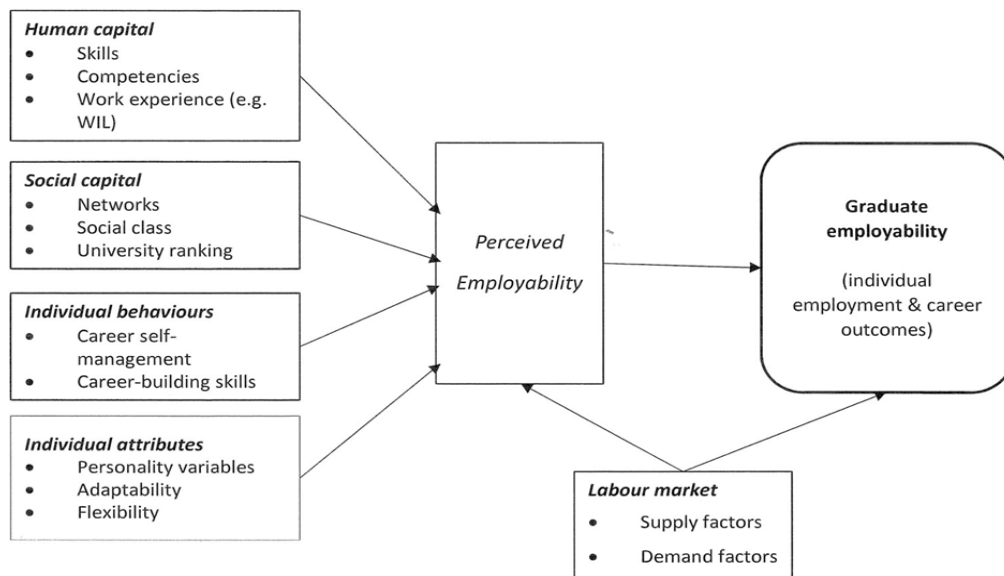
The concept of employability has been described as "the ability of an individual to acquire and keep a job they desire" (Rothwell & Arnold, 2009, p. 25). Criticism exists around universities' strategies to support and enhance student employability. Baron and McCormack (2024), for example, argue higher education "ignores the social, cultural and economic factors that impact on the ability to gain employment" (p. 260). These arguments informed the development of a holistic, student-centered Unit, and the application of Clarke's Student Employability Framework (2017) (Figure 1), which integrates these factors, to plan its content, activities, and assessments.

The Development of a Tailored Non-Placement WIL Employability Unit

The Unit was informed by international student employability and wider WIL research, student satisfaction surveys, major course review processes, and employability skills conversations with industry representatives.

WIL is a recognized pathway to heightened student employability (Jackson, 2024; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017). WIL can be defined as "any arrangement where students undertake learning in a work context as part of their course requirements" (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency [TEQSA], 2022, para. 2). Perhaps the best-known example is placement WIL, regarded as the optimal way for international students to develop crucial employability skills via immersion into cultural and social industry norms (Aprile & Knight, 2020; Nghia & Duyen, 2019).

FIGURE 1: Student Employability Framework (Clarke, 2017, reprinted with permission by Informa UK LTD, #120513).



While this evidence suggests placement WIL may be the best approach to enhance employability, this was not an option for the Master of Public Health (MPH) students at the time of the Unit's development. Dominant barriers included the student's lack of prior engagement in cultural activities relevant to the Australian public health industry and societal context (in particular, learning on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples). MPH-specific limitations included the short timeframe of the degree (four semesters), which restricted opportunities to prepare the student to navigate these aspects of the Australian workplace.

University student participation in non-workplace WIL activities, described as "critical for meeting diverse student and partner needs" (Jackson, 2024, p. 769), has become more common in recent years across higher education in Australia, while placement WIL engagement has remained static (Australian Collaborative Education Network, 2023). Non-placement WIL approaches are increasingly recognized as valid and credible alternatives to placement WIL, with promising results reported from studies of student and industry perceptions (Reedy et al, 2020; Yong et al., 2024). A non-placement design was adopted, aligning with advice that this WIL approach is appropriate with international students who experience communication and workplace cultural adjustment challenges (Universities Australia, 2019). Non-placement WIL includes online/virtual activities with industry engagement, classroom-based industry-partnered projects, simulation, and other activities (such as assessments) (TEQSA, 2022) (See Table 1 for Unit examples). The approach achieves WIL principles of authentic industry engagement and collaboration through reflection, simulation, and planned classroom industry interaction activities (Dunn & McLean, 2025).

Applying Clarke's Student Employability Framework to the international student higher education experience

As with any student support approach, the success of student employability activities requires an understanding of the students themselves, their social context needs, capacities, and resources. To this end, Clarke's Student Employability Framework (2017) (Figure 1) was considered within the international student context. Each dimension of the framework was applied to the international student context, in order to plan the Unit content, assessment activities, and overall approach (Table 1).

TABLE 1: Clarke's Dimensions Applied to the International Student Context.

Clarke's dimension	Content/activities	Assessments
Human capital <i>Skills, competencies, experience</i>	Introduction to personal and technical employability skills The recruitment process Australian work culture and industry expectations Industry guest speaker workshops Using the STAR	Resume writing for the Australian job market and job specification The CV and cover letter Unpacking and responding to job criteria and person specification requirements Recorded mock interview practice with peer feedback
Social capital <i>Industry and community networks, reciprocal relationships</i>	Supporting students to find and connect with volunteers, Government and NGOs Conference and professional organization bodies-student membership Shared cultural cuisine and traditions events The 'hidden' job market	Establishment of quality LinkedIn site
Individual behaviors <i>Career building skills Career self-management skills</i>	Current and emerging opportunities in public health careers Reflecting and benchmarking current skills and experiences Accessing and navigating hidden job market Auditing employability skills	Personal portfolio of employability skills and experiences relevant to industry requirements Career planning exercise
Individual attributes <i>Personality, adaptability, and flexibility</i>	Understanding personal and technical skills Transferable skills awareness Realistic approaches to career planning Strengths based approach	Personal portfolio of employability skills and experiences relevant to industry requirements Career planning exercise

METHOD

Research approval was obtained for this study from the Edith Cowan University (ECU) Human Research Ethics Committee (project number 2022-03080). The study complied with the usual expectations of informed consent, voluntary participation, and participant confidentiality. The teaching team carried out all aspects of the research study. The focus group facilitator was not involved in teaching or assessing the unit, avoiding potential unequal power relationship concerns.

The study was grounded in the social constructivist paradigm, which considers reality as subjective and socially constructed (Pfadenhauer & Knoblauch, 2018). This fits with the study aim to understand experiences and personal perspectives and the associated social, cultural, and wider structural influences. A qualitative approach used focus group sessions to collect data in the penultimate week of the Unit. A recruitment post with participation letter and consent form links was posted on the

student learning platform, and also emailed to each student. Interested students returned a signed consent form to the focus group facilitator. The purposive sample was limited to current international students of the Unit. Four focus groups were held between 2022 and 2024. One took place online via Microsoft Teams (May, 2022), and three were conducted face-to-face (May 2023, October 2023, and May 2024). Each lasted approximately one hour. The consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ checklist for interviews and focus groups) was used to support the rigor of the study, with aspects (data analysis consensus, peer relationships and use of direct quotes in findings) described in this article.

Participant Demographics

Thirty-one students took part in focus groups, the majority (20) were female, reflecting the gender split of the MPH unit. Students came from 13 countries (Table 2).

TABLE 2: Participant Demographics.

Focus group date	Participant numbers/ total unit enrolment	Gender	Home country
May 2022	2/5	2 female	Kenya (1), Zambia (1)
May 2023	11/18	7 female, 4 male	Bhutan (3), Jordan (1), India (1), Philippines (2), Zimbabwe (1), Sri Lanka (3)
October 2023	3/18	2 female, 1 male	India (1), Kenya (1), Bhutan (1)
May 2024	15/60	9 female, 6 male	Türkiye (1), India (3), Switzerland (1), Zimbabwe (1), Bangladesh (1), Philippines (1), Bhutan (2), Tanzania (2), Kenya (2), Nigeria (1)

The focus group guides included the following topics and prompts:

- Initial and emerging expectations of employability, future employment, and career plans;
- Experience of seeking employment/volunteering positions during the degree;
- Unit strengths; and
- Gaps and limitations of the unit.

The guide was piloted for clarity and meaning with two international postgraduate MPH students, with no required changes. Pilot data was excluded from study data analysis. Focus group discussions were recorded using Otter.ai (Otter.ai, 2025) audio transcription software. Text was de-identified and transcribed for analysis.

Data were organized via NVivo14 software (Lumivero, 2023). The teaching team thematically analyzed the deidentified focus group transcripts utilizing a range of analytic coding strategies described by Elliot (2018). Codes were organized into themes and subthemes through a process of consensus. Direct

quotes within the findings are attributed to the date and number of the focus group the participants attended (for example ‘May, 2023’).

FINDINGS

To offer a transparent understanding of the student experience of the Unit and associated changes in employability perspectives and skills, subthemes were organized under overarching themes of early perspectives and expectations, raised awareness and broadened understanding, unit highlights, recommendations for change, and external issues (Table 3).

TABLE 3: Themes and Subthemes.

Overarching Theme	Subtheme	Subtheme	Subtheme	Subtheme
Early perspectives and expectations	Confused and unrealistic expectations	Developing concerns		
Raised awareness and broadened understanding	Differences in recruitment processes	Workplace cultural differences	Personal employability skills and their transferability	The importance of connections
Unit highlights	The practical approach to learning and teaching activities	The practical nature of the assessments		
Recommendations for change	Adapting assessments to support further employability skill development	The option of flexible placement WIL		
The Labor market (external issues)	Visa issues			

Theme: Early Perspectives and Expectations

Participants discussed their early perspectives and expectations around their own employability and future employment on graduation.

Confused and unrealistic expectations

Confusion was common about the types of careers available to public health graduates. One participant stated: “So, at the beginning, it was really like, I was also a bit confused what I’m going to do after finishing this course” (October, 2023).

Many participants' early ideas about employability skills were limited to the technical skills associated with public health, for example: "I think from where I come from, it's mostly the qualification that you have, as a scientist and the job require you to do science things" (May, 2023).

Most participants described how they had initially held positive expectations about their employment perspectives on graduation. Students came to Australia expecting the MPH to be a guaranteed pathway into senior public health roles on graduation. One student expressed: "I'm doing a two-year master's degree. I'm already a doctor or nurse or whatever. I've just spent whatever on this degree; I should get a high-level job now" (May, 2023).

Developing concerns

Discussions with international MPH student peers, especially those in later stages of the degree, as well as recent graduates, challenged these perceptions: "I think it is reality versus expectation. If you're staying in Australia, it's a bit of a rude awakening because it takes a long time (to find a desired job)" (October, 2023).

Many discussed developing concerns about future employment opportunities on graduation influenced by discussion with past international MPH students: "Both of us were one semester late to graduate so my previous classmates, they're still struggling. They're still looking because they're looking, they're struggling, really struggling" (October, 2023).

This led to a level of despondency, with some students describing how they had considered dropping out of the course: "When we first started, everyone told me it's so hard to get a job and what are your options? So, for a minute, I was like, oh, should I change my degree?" (October, 2023).

Theme: Raised Awareness and Broadened Understanding

Students described how their engagement in Unit activities supported a growing awareness of employment and career opportunities in public health as well as areas requiring personal development.

Career opportunities

Participants discussed how the Unit had broadened their understanding of the range of available public health careers within Australia and also internationally:

So actually, before this unit, I thought the jobs that we can find were a bit narrower. But after taking this, I found that there are so many broad options. I thought it was the only public health officer. But after this, this unit, I found ... some different perspective on what jobs are out there, for example, occupational health and safety. In our countries, we didn't have those roles. So that broadens our perspective on what are related to public health here (May, 2023).

The Australian recruitment process

Unit activities on recruitment supported student awareness of the significant differences in recruitment processes in Australia compared to their home country. Many had attempted to secure public health work while completing their degree. None had been successful. Ways into employment were described as 'new' and 'confusing': "We're international and don't know how to get into the system" (May, 2023).

Students found the Australian approach to the resume described in the Unit was very different to their past experience. Most commonly, students were surprised the resume needed to be tailored to a job specification, rather than a generic format: “I think I realized that my CV was completely the wrong thing, right, what they might have been looking for” (May, 2024).

Resume should be tailor fit for the company that you're doing. Yes, the skills, again, finding information about the company, looking for it, not just for the role, but for the values. That definitely helps making a resume that's aligned to how it's done here in Australia. In my home country it was like a CV or a resume ... it was not tailored for a specific job. It was the same thing that I would send for all job (May, 2022).

Many reflected on recent unsuccessful job applications before taking the Unit, and wondered if their resume had been to blame:

So, starting here, in 2022 I was applying for jobs in every website, and I wonder why with the many applications I sent I only got one which I am working in now. Only in my last semester in this unit did I realize how important it is to reflect the employee's values (in the resume) (October, 2023).

Participants often described the ‘hidden nature’ of the Australian recruitment process and job market: “Like a secret code is a secret thing that you don't know about” (May, 2023). Also: “Applying for a government job, the STAR thing. It's sort of like there's a door with a lock and you've just got to find the right key” (May, 2024).

Cultural differences in the workplace

Focus group discussions included the introduction of Unit learning activities on cultural differences in the workplace. Issues of hierarchy and power as well as self-promotion dominated. Participants varied in their attitude towards these differences, from appreciation to feelings of discomfort:

Here what I what I like is there is no superiority. Like you can if you step in workplace, you can see managers and employees, and everyone look the same. And do the same. It's more about teamwork here is different from my country (May, 2024).

Students felt reluctant to practice self-promotion, illustrated here by the comment: “Like XX said, doing the interview, you need to own up to your experiences, which is at least in my country, it would sound arrogant” (May, 2023).

Individual and transferable employability skills

Unit engagement supported students’ awareness of the importance of individual employability skills, including those requiring development:

As you progress through ... you are learning your people skills, your soft skills, as well as your technical skills. And by the end of week ten I got to know ‘wait a minute. I actually still have some areas that I may need to get some experience on (May, 2022).

The employability skills portfolio was a valued tool to aid reflection and to benchmark personal employability skills: “The employability skills record (was helpful because) I got to know the areas that I need to work on” (May, 2022).

Participants discussed how the Unit activities had helped them become more positive about the value of their own skills and experiences and their transferable nature:

I was afraid of stating, for example, that I'm an advocate for, public health stuff. I was like, oh, I shouldn't state that, because I haven't done anything about it. But then after doing the (Unit activities), I'm like, 'No, I've done heaps on it'. I can say that. (October, 2023).

The importance of connections

Students realized the importance of social networks during the Unit:

When I was new here, I was looking for a job for like three months. Sending all the applications and yeah, I was like, I had a nice job back in my country and then here, they refuse to accept me. So, it's like what's wrong with me? And then I realized that here they prefer connection. Yeah. If you know someone, that's how I get my job through connection. And that's one of the I think what that's one of the biggest learning that I that I learned here (May, 2022).

The Unit also supported students' awareness of the various ways they could develop these connections: "(Tutor) sends us a lot of volunteering stuff. We need to have that practical experience too. Yeah, when we graduate, we can say, 'Yeah, I loved working in, like, health promotion, because I've tried it like'" (May, 2022).

As with other aspects of self-promotion, social media networking and personal branding were new to students: "My LinkedIn profile was just my name before and now I'm actually ... actually making connections talking to people" (May, 2023).

Students revealed they had benefitted from the Unit guidance on ways to develop their own brand, and on how to use it appropriately and effectively.

Theme: Unit Highlights

The practical approach to learning and teaching activities

The practical nature of the Unit, in which students worked in class to develop, for example, networking artefacts and practiced communication skills important to the recruitment process was universally appreciated. For example, "I wouldn't say it's an easy unit, but it's a very important unit ... a good unit to ease into public health" (May, 2024). Also "I have I never had a LinkedIn. This is the first. From here. I made my LinkedIn profile, and I attached my CV, and I sent out, so I think this is the most practical unit in MPH" (May, 2024).

Students also appreciated industry guest speakers who they then followed on LinkedIn. Other valued aspects of the Unit included the opportunity to practice interview skills with industry guests and student peers, and to receive constructive feedback:

Like for me, like for the interview part, like I did a lot of interviews, and also because I was manager back in country, I also conduct interviews for people. But here in this unit, this is the first time where I like did the interview and I received ... very useful feedback. So, I improved (May, 2024).

The practical nature of the assessments

The practical nature of the assessments was also appreciated because of the tangible and immediately useable outputs they supported. Students commented on the beneficial nature of the assessment:

That definitely helps making a resume that's aligned to how it's done here in Australia. I don't need to keep on asking people, what do I do? How to express myself? So, example, so get the feedback from the first assignment for the resume and how to do a cover letter. It really, really helped (May, 2023).

The usefulness of the employability skills portfolio as an aid to support job applications was also appreciated: "That table was very useful applying to any job ... all I had to do this time was just copy paste from that table. Start it straight away" (October, 2023).

Theme: Recommendations for Change

Adapting assessments to support further employability skill development

A few students felt their teamwork and presentation employability skills could be further supported by the Unit assessments: "(The assessment) could be something like a group assignment, I think we learn something we learn teamwork" (May, 2024). Also, "I think we could develop something and then present it in front of the class. Presentation, yes, yeah, just more talking" (May, 2024).

Flexible placement WIL

Students unanimously discussed the need for WIL placement within industry: "We all agree that we need any practical thing that we can just go and just try and see the experience in public health in Australia, and see what we like, what we don't" (May, 2023).

Some students felt the loss of income could be managed when the potential longer-term career benefits of placement WIL were considered: "I'm pretty sure like most of the students will be happy to work for free if they get experience" (May, 2024).

Most, however, discussed how the placement would need to be designed to meet their time commitments and financial situations: "Even if it was like a month, two days a week, I think people can manage pulling out two days" (October, 2023), also "Some flexibility like whether we like for example, 20 hours, whether we can finish it in one week, or two weeks so it's good to have some flexibility (May, 2024).

External factors

Students also discussed wider issues outside the direct control of the university and unit academics. Employment restrictions imposed by the international student visa dominated these discussions: "Because a lot of public health related jobs are government jobs, and a lot of government jobs require a PR (permanent residency visa)" (October, 2023).

Students talked about the difficulty with accessing Government public health career options: "I've seen so many jobs for public health, wants citizens or permanent residence. Strictly, they're saying, no international students" (May, 2023).

The perceived unfairness of this situation was commonly voiced:

I have gone for interviews where the interviews goes very well and then at the end they ask if you're a domestic or an international student. As soon as you see you and international, they'll tell you, as some are very open and they will tell you we won't be able to give you this because we don't want to give you all the proper training. And then at the end of it, your visa expires and you have to go back. I would see a lot of my fellow international students being so qualified. I would say that sometimes even more qualified than domestic students (October, 2022).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study explored international student experiences of MPH students engaged in a tailored employability unit. The study focused on the students' perceptions of their employability skills and the influences on this perception. Each aspect of Clarke's framework (2017), adapted and informed by international student literature, expert opinion, and industry and student consultation, provided a basis to explore these perceptions through an individual and socio-cultural lens.

The findings describe a dynamic, challenging, but ultimately empowering, journey of student employability perspectives. An interpretation of these findings is presented of the students' changing employability perspectives and the aspects of the Unit that facilitated this. Implications for higher education practitioners' intent on improving employability equity for international students are offered below.

Initial Misperceptions: The Importance of Early, Explicit, Real-World Discussions

Overall, the students began their degree with a perception of their employability and of what 'being employable' means that was incongruent with Australian reality. Students reported a general lack of awareness and understanding of several aspects of the Australian industry employment expectations. The students' initial unrealistic graduate employment expectations reflect previous findings with international students at Australian universities (Coffey et al., 2018; Gribble et al., 2015). The misperception the degree alone would 'qualify' them for future senior public health positions in Australia contrasted with the reality of Australia's requirement for demonstrable personal employability skills. This idea seemed to be founded on the value the students placed on technical employability skills such as university qualifications, and the lack of awareness of the importance of personal skills, such as leadership and cultural competence.

Students perceived themselves as poorly equipped with the knowledge required to navigate Australian workplace recruitment processes. Identified examples included the tailored resume and hidden job market. These findings extend the idea of the "hidden curriculum" identified in studies on academic literacy, known to disadvantage international students without prior experience of Australian higher education processes and expectations (Blasco, 2014).

Participants reported that the explicit and transparent approach of the Unit facilitated their increased awareness and navigation of Australian industry expectations. Examples highlighted by the students included tailoring of the resume for a specific job and the STAR method (Situation Task Action Result) required by Government employers, which was new to all the students in the study.

Transparent discussions around cultural differences were also important. These were named, shared, and normalized in a safe environment. Students highlighted the helpfulness of discussions and

guidance around cultural norms such as the lack of hierarchy and the importance of self-promotion in the Australian workplace culture, both of which were new concepts.

The findings reinforce the requirement for a student “needs-centered” approach to employability activities and indicate generic approaches to employability may be unhelpful, and in some cases irrelevant.

Overcoming Disillusionment: A Strengths-Based Approach

Participants reported that their personal experiences of repeated rejection from potential employers during their degree, as well as stories from past international MPH peers unsuccessful in securing desired postgraduate employment, left them disillusioned and lacking confidence in their own potential. The reframing of expectations required explicit discussions of industry requirements and reflection activities on current “gaps” in student skills and experiences. Although confronting, this approach was balanced with activities where students could identify their possession of transferable personal employability skills, including cultural insights, language proficiencies, life experience, and associated resilience, qualities highly valued in the global job market (Jackson, 2024). This approach is informed by the call in the scholarly literature to shift from a deficit approach with international students, to one that recognizes the importance of difference (Felton & Harrison, 2016). Vu et al. (2024) describe this application of a strengths-based approach, balanced with realistic management of expectations, as ‘critical’ to international student employability success. The Unit’s celebration of cultural traditions, such as traditional foods, represented one aspect of employability skill development that Clarke (2017) argues has been underexplored with international students, and represents a potential way to ameliorate the lack of social connection among international students in Australia.

Meeting Socio-Cultural Needs: Practical Approaches and Tangible Outputs

The practical approach to the Unit, including guided activities in class to develop, share, and discuss recruitment strategies and materials, and strengthen interview skills, were highly valued. For these time-poor students with competing paid work responsibilities, such activities offered protected time to share ideas, receive expert feedback, and develop tangible resources. In this way, the Unit was authentic and relatable to the students and their needs. Students reported that the employability skills portfolio was considered a useful tool to support critical reflection, identification and recording of transferable skills, and a helpful method of demonstrating these skills. Assessments were similarly valued for their practical nature and focus on resource development and career planning activities within class time. The request for assessment activities to support teamwork and presentation skills potentially demonstrates the student’s raised awareness of important personal employability skills and their ability to consider ways to acquire them.

The Question of Placement WIL

While non-placement WIL activities were appreciated, the importance of social connection and immersion in ‘real’ placements was desired. For international students, placement WIL offers an ideal opportunity to develop English language skills and Australian industry networks (Gribble et al., 2015). Real-world exposure to ongoing relationship building and the nuances and unpredictability of Australian workplace culture, both of which enhance the alignment of social and cultural capital between international students and Australian employers, was therefore limited.

Students from developing nations including India, Bhutan and some African countries are highly represented in the MPH. These students are underrepresented in placement WIL and experience the lowest employment outcomes on graduation (Universities Australia, 2019). This paradoxical situation means those students who would benefit from placement WIL the most have the least access. The teaching team were well aware that the non-placement approach to the Unit reflected this situation. The reasoning had been influenced in part by the concern about the impact of unpaid WIL on the MPH students' paid work and carer commitments. According to Bell et al. (2025), international students tend to be adversely financially affected by the unpaid placement. Previous MPH international students had similarly raised this issue as a barrier to placement WIL.

Other considerations were the student's lack of acculturation within their host country prior to commencing the Unit, which has been shown to reduce preparedness for successful WIL placement experiences in Australia (Gribble et al., 2015). This, and insufficient English language proficiency, can dissuade industry from hosting these students in WIL (O'Reilly & Milner, 2015; Pham et al., 2018) and damage the university's reputation with industry partners (Gribble et al., 2015).

Hay and Fleming (2021) highlight key student consequences in WIL placements, including misconduct incidents among those students who are insufficiently prepared for the experience. The authors note the responsibility of the university to find safe and suitable industry placements to meet international student needs. While they recommend an assessment of potential host organizations' ability to provide such environments, they concede the methods to do this are currently under-investigated and underdeveloped.

In summary, the financial, competing time requirements, communication challenges, and 'cultural fit' expectations of industry can reduce the realistic opportunity for placement WIL. The time, staffing, support services, and financial resources required to counter these challenges may be prohibitive for some universities. Responding to the student wishes for placement WIL have prompted the teaching team to again consider flexible approaches to placement WIL, within the Unit, that recognize these challenges and the associated resources required to achieve this outcome. This option was achieved in 2025 and will be evaluated in a later publication.

The Wider Political Situation

The political aspect of employability, while outside the control of academics and students per se, was frequently raised by participants and, therefore, included in this paper. A major topic of discussion was the requirement of a permanent residency visa in government public health jobs. This barring of international students on temporary student visas is an undeniable issue of inequity, and one that created concern among the students in the study. Rapidly changing government policy on international student visas can be considered unfair and unethical to those students who have invested in Australian higher education. Clear guidelines and guarantees are required to help current international students manage their graduate work expectations and guide future students' decisions to invest in Australian higher education (Norton, 2025).

LIMITATIONS

A limitation of this study was the reliance on self-selected participants for the focus groups, which may introduce volunteer bias and restrict the findings to those individuals with a strong perception of the Unit. The study also considers the experiences of international students at one university. While this limits generalizability, the inclusion of student demographics, and the wider evidence on international

student employability experiences in the unit development description and interpretation of findings, makes the study particularly useful to those within higher education intent on developing tailored and accessible international student WIL experiences. Further, the reliance on student perceptions cannot demonstrate student learning or employability skill development in an objective way.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has presented international student perceptions of their own employability while engaged in a tailored non-placement WIL unit. The study demonstrates the importance of WIL activities that apply explicit, real-world, strengths-based, and practical approaches adapted to international students' individual and socio-cultural needs. It also highlights the need to consider flexible placement WIL opportunities to further enhance international student employability perceptions within the Australian graduate market and redress current inequities.

DECLARATION ON THE USE OF GENERATIVE-AI

Generative AI was not used in the preparation, writing, and editing of this manuscript.

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About the Journal

The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning (IJWIL) publishes double-blind peer-reviewed original research and topical issues 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, entrepreneurships, 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](#).

Types of Manuscripts Sought by the Journal

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

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

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

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.

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