Whose employability? Self-efficacy, resilience, and the placement experiences of students with disability in work-integrated learning

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Work-integrated learning (WIL) is widely recognized as a vehicle for developing graduate employability, yet little is known about how students with disability experience WIL placements. This explanatory sequential mixed-methods study investigated self-efficacy and resilience among students enrolled in a community-based service learning course at an Australian university. Seventy-six students completed a modified General Self-Efficacy Scale and the Personal Resilience Questionnaire. Students identifying as having a disability (n = 14) scored lower across all resilience subscales and reported marginally lower self-efficacy than their peers without disability. Two students with disability participated in in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis revealed that structural and social barriers, inaccessible workplaces, reluctance to disclose disability, energy management challenges, shaped students' placement experiences in ways that standard WIL preparation does not address. Findings are contextually specific to this sample, but suggest programs should embed accessibility into placement brokerage, build structured check-in mechanisms, and prepare host organizations for inclusive supervision.

Keywords: Disability, employability, inclusive placement design, resilience, self-efficacy, service learning

Work-integrated learning (WIL) occupies an increasingly central position in Australian higher education as a mechanism for developing graduate employability. Universities promote WIL placements as opportunities for students to develop professional identity, apply disciplinary knowledge in authentic settings, and build the behavioral competencies that employers value (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021). The evidence broadly supports these claims: students who participate in WIL report enhanced confidence, stronger professional networks, and a clearer sense of their employability (Brooks & Youngson, 2016; Jackson & Dean, 2022).

However, the benefits of WIL are not distributed equally. Despite growing numbers of students with disability entering Australian higher education, currently estimated at around ten per cent of the university population (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024), there has been remarkably little research on how these students experience WIL placements (Dollinger et al., 2023; Mackaway, 2019). The WIL literature has largely proceeded as though the student undertaking a placement is an undifferentiated figure: able-bodied, neurotypical, and unencumbered by the structural barriers that shape the educational and employment trajectories of people with disability. Where disability does appear in the WIL literature, it has tended to focus on host organization perspectives (Lawlis et al., 2024) or on the challenges of specific professional placements in health disciplines (Hewett et al., 2020), rather than on the experiences and self-perceptions of students with disability themselves.

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This gap matters for both practical and conceptual reasons. Practically, if WIL is to deliver on its promise of employability for all students, its design must account for the barriers that students with disability face, barriers that begin well before the placement itself. People with disability in Australia have substantially lower rates of labor force participation than the general population (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024), are less likely to gain full-time employment after graduation (QILT Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, 2022), and face documented discrimination in recruitment (Ameri et al., 2018; Harvey et al., 2017). WIL placements sit at the intersection of these educational and employment barriers. They represent both an opportunity, for students with disability to develop professional confidence and demonstrate capability, and a risk, where the structural conditions of workplaces may reproduce the exclusion that WIL is ostensibly designed to overcome.

Conceptually, the absence of disability perspectives from WIL research reflects a broader tendency within employability discourse to locate work-readiness in individual attributes, skills, confidence, and resilience, rather than in the structural conditions that enable or constrain participation (Dollinger, Finneran, et al., 2024). When WIL programs measure self-efficacy and resilience without attending to the barriers that depress these measures for some students, they risk mistaking structural disadvantage for individual deficit. This study takes that tension seriously by using quantitative measures of self-efficacy and resilience alongside qualitative accounts of placement experience to explore how students with disability navigate WIL.

The authors acknowledge that there are many ways of using language to recognize difference: disability, disabled, differing ability, and varying ability are all terms in current use. In this article, authors use the term 'disability' while recognizing that language choices carry conceptual and political weight. The authorship team includes a researcher with lived experience of disability, whose contribution the authorship team recognize as that of an expert and co-author, not merely a subject for observation.

This study addresses two research questions:

1. Do students with disability report different levels of self-efficacy and resilience compared to their peers without disability prior to WIL placement, and if so, what patterns emerge across different dimensions of these constructs?
2. How do students with disability describe their WIL placement experiences, and what structural, social, or personal factors do they identify as shaping those experiences?

This article proceeds as follows. The article first reviews the relevant literature on disability and employment, WIL and employability, and the limited existing research on disability within WIL contexts. The methodology, an explanatory mixed-methods design combining survey data on self-efficacy and resilience with in-depth interviews, before presenting findings that reveal both the quantitative patterns and the lived experiences that underlie them. The article concludes by considering what these findings mean for the design of WIL programs that genuinely serve students of all abilities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Disability, Employment and Higher Education

The relationship between disability and employment in Australia provides essential context for understanding why WIL experiences matter for students with disability. Working-age individuals with disability have substantially lower rates of labor force participation and employment compared to

people without disability (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024). People with disability are 30 - 40% less likely to be employed than those without disability (Ye et al., 2026), and this disparity persists among university graduates, with the full-time employment rate for graduates with disability almost ten per cent lower than for those without (QILT Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, 2022). The barriers to employment are well-documented: employer reluctance to make reasonable accommodations (Harvey et al., 2017), differences in hiring practices (Ameri et al., 2018; Bricout & Bentley, 2000), and workplace discrimination, particularly against individuals with non-apparent conditions (Dalgin & Bellini, 2008; Hipes et al., 2016). Individuals with disability also report challenges around workplace disclosure, fearing stigma and discrimination (Lindsay et al., 2019).

Within higher education, students with disability face compounding barriers. They have lower retention and success rates (Kilpatrick et al., 2017; Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011), and report that the tertiary environment offers limited understanding of disability (Mullins & Preyde, 2013; Strnadová et al., 2015). Disclosure remains a fraught decision: students who self-advocate and disclose may access better support (Hewett et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2021), but stigma operates as a significant barrier against doing so (Kendall, 2016). These dynamics are relevant to WIL because the placement setting introduces a second institutional context, the workplace, where disclosure decisions must be navigated again, often without the support structures available on campus.

How society defines and frames disability also shapes outcomes. The social model of disability emphasizes that disadvantage arises from social structures rather than individual impairment (Brett, 2016), in contrast to medical models that locate limitation within the person (World Health Organization, 2002). This distinction is important for WIL research because the measures commonly used to assess student readiness, self-efficacy, resilience, and confidence, tend to capture individual-level constructs. Lower scores among students with disability may reflect structural barriers rather than individual deficits, a tension this study addresses directly.

Work-Integrated Learning, Employability and Disability

Work-integrated learning is regarded as essential to graduate employment outcomes (Brooks & Youngson, 2016; Jackson & Dean, 2022; Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021). Through WIL, students develop generic skills including communication and teamwork (Linn, 2015; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017), professional identity (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021), and the behavioral competencies employers increasingly value (Brown & Hesketh, 2004). WIL encompasses a range of modalities, including industry placements, clinical practicums, and service learning. Service learning, a for-credit WIL modality in which students reflect on their service with a community partner in relation to course content and civic responsibility (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996), has been shown to improve self-efficacy and self-esteem (Eyler, 2000) and to foster a sense of social responsibility (Linn, 2015).

Despite these established benefits, there is limited research on how students with disability experience WIL placements. What literature does exist on disability within WIL has predominantly examined one modality, service learning, and has focused on attitudes towards students with disability from the viewpoint of non-disabled participants (Burns et al., 1999; Dymond et al., 2008, 2011; Lahav et al., 2018; Shyman, 2022), rather than foregrounding the perspectives of students with disability themselves. Burns et al. (1999), for example, found that integrating students with severe disabilities as equal co-contributors in service learning projects produced more positive attitudes from non-disabled students, an important finding, but one that centers the non-disabled experience.

Recent scholarship has begun to address this gap. Dollinger et al. (2023) surveyed 132 students with disability at an Australian university about their WIL experiences, finding that while students were motivated to participate, they held significant concerns about acceptance and accommodation. Boye (2024) explored the lived experiences of students with disability in engineering and IT work placements through a participatory research approach, finding that participants identified significant discrimination and a lack of connection, community, and support as key issues. Lawlis et al. (2024) examined host organization perspectives, identifying that perceived need for student disclosure, physical limitations, and limited organizational knowledge impeded inclusive WIL provision. Wall et al. (2026) have called for meaningful change in how institutions support students with disability in WIL, advocating for co-designed approaches that bring together students, industry, and academics. These studies collectively point to a WIL system that was not designed with disability in mind, and in which the burden of adaptation falls disproportionately on students.

At the design level, Garant-Jones et al. (2024) conducted a scoping review of 34 empirical studies examining equity, diversity, and inclusion in WIL program design, finding that inclusive WIL requires attention at multiple levels: institutional policy, curriculum design, host preparation, and assessment practices. Lawlis et al. (2023) similarly reviewed challenges in delivering health-based WIL to students with disability, identifying systemic barriers across the placement lifecycle.

Self-Efficacy, Resilience and Disability

Self-efficacy, an individual's belief in their capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific outcomes (Bandura, 1997), has been extensively studied in educational contexts. Research demonstrates that self-efficacy predicts academic performance, persistence, and goal achievement (Cassidy, 2015; Martin & Marsh, 2006). For students with disability, however, the relationship is more complex. Studies have found that students with learning disabilities report lower academic self-efficacy than peers without disability, and that this relationship is mediated by experiences of academic failure and stigma rather than by capability alone (Hen & Goroshit, 2014). Self-efficacy in this population appears particularly sensitive to environmental factors: supportive institutional contexts can enhance self-efficacy beliefs, while hostile or inaccessible environments can suppress them.

Resilience, broadly understood as the capacity to adapt successfully in the face of adversity, has similarly been studied as both an individual trait and an environmentally shaped capacity. Cassidy (2015) found that academic self-efficacy is a significant predictor of resilience among university students, with both constructs influencing academic outcomes. Critically, Ungar (2012) argues that resilience should be understood not as a fixed individual attribute but as shaped by the interaction between individual capacities and structural conditions. In educational contexts, this means that lower resilience scores may reflect depleting environments rather than deficient individuals. For students with disability navigating WIL placements, where they must manage not only the typical challenges of professional learning but also accessibility barriers, disclosure decisions, and attitudinal assumptions, resilience may be systematically depleted in ways that standard measures do not distinguish from individual deficit.

This literature suggests that using self-efficacy and resilience measures in WIL research requires careful interpretation. Lower scores among students with disability cannot be straightforwardly read as evidence of lesser readiness; they may instead reflect the cumulative burden of navigating environments not designed to support them.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) comprising two phases. In the first phase, a quantitative survey measured perceptions of resilience and self-efficacy among a cohort of undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in a WIL placement course. The course used a service learning modality in which students undertook community-based placements with partner organizations. Service learning is a for-credit WIL modality distinguished by its integration of community service with academic content and structured reflection (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996); while distinct from industry placements or clinical practicums, it shares the core WIL characteristic of requiring students to navigate professional environments beyond the campus. The course used a service learning modality in which students undertook community-based placements with partner organizations. In the second phase, opt-in semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with survey participants who identified as having a disability. This design was chosen because the quantitative data identified patterns in self-efficacy and resilience across disability status, while the qualitative data then explored the experiences and structural factors that might explain those patterns. The sequential structure enabled the interview questions to be informed by themes drawn from the survey instruments, ensuring that qualitative exploration was grounded in the constructs under investigation.

Participants

Participants were recruited from a cohort of 112 undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in a WIL course at an Australian university in 2019. Eligibility was restricted to participants aged 18 years and over who were enrolled in the course. Seventy-six participants completed either a paper-based or online version of the questionnaire, representing a response rate of 68%.

The sample contained 62 adults without disability, aged 18–64, including 19 males and 41 females, with years of education ranging from 12–20 ($M = 16.0$, $SD = 1.63$). Fourteen participants (18.4% of the sample) identified as having a disability, notably higher than the approximately 10% prevalence in the general university population. They self-identified as having either a physical (apparent) or non-visible (non-apparent) condition or disability, defined as "any long-term illness, disability or impairment." Of the 3 males, 10 females, and 1 other gender in that participant group, they had between 10 and 23 years of education. Core demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1; a detailed breakdown of disability types is available from the authors on request.

TABLE 1: Participants' socio-demographic characteristics.

Characteristic	Without disability (N = 62)	With disability (n = 14)
Age (years)	18–64	—
Gender, n		
Male	19	3
Female	41	10
Other	2	1
Education (years)		
Range	12–20	10–23
Mean (SD)	16.0 (1.63)	—

Note. Participants who identified as having a disability reported either physical (apparent) or non-visible (non-apparent) conditions, defined as "any long-term illness, disability or impairment." Participants could identify with multiple disability categories; therefore, percentages exceed 100%. A detailed breakdown of disability types is available from the authors on request.

Measures

General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE). The study used a modified version of the GSE (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995), a self-report measure of global self-efficacy. The original instrument consists of 18 items scored on a 4-point Likert-type scale (1 = not at all true, 2 = hardly true, 3 = moderately true, 4 = exactly true), with twelve positively worded items and six negatively worded items (reverse scored). For this study, ten of the eighteen items were modified to refer to self-efficacy and coping in placement and/or academic situations, for example, the positively worded item "I am confident that I can deal efficiently with unexpected academic or placement events" and the negatively worded item "I frequently feel overwhelmed by my studies." These modifications were made to increase the ecological validity of the measure for WIL students, aligning items with the specific contexts in which self-efficacy would be tested during placement. The remaining eight items were retained in their original form. Higher scores indicate greater self-efficacy or confidence in managing academic and placement performance. See Luszczynska et al. (2005) for the psychometric properties of the original scale. It should be noted that the psychometric properties reported by Luszczynska et al. apply to the unmodified instrument; the modified version used here has not been independently validated, and results should not be treated as directly comparable with studies using the standard GSE. Internal consistency for the modified scale was acceptable (Cronbach's $\alpha = .79$ for the full sample; $\alpha = .86$ for the disability subgroup). This represents a limitation, and readers should interpret scores on the modified GSE with appropriate caution, recognizing that item modifications may have altered the scale's internal consistency and factor structure relative to the validated original instrument.

Personal Resilience Questionnaire (PRQ). The PRQ is a self-report measure of resilience scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The 42-item measure has six domains: Sense of Purpose (e.g., "I feel my life has meaning"), Positive Mental Attitude (e.g., "I consistently maintain a positive point of view in my thinking"), Connect with Others (e.g., "I find it easy to ask for and accept help from other people"), Determination (e.g., "I draw strength from having overcome previous challenges and tough experiences"), Taking Control (e.g., "In stressful times I control my own strong feelings"), and Looking After Yourself (e.g., "I eat a healthy diet"). Higher scores indicate greater personal resilience. The PRQ was selected for this study because its six-domain structure captures dimensions of resilience, particularly social connection, sense of purpose, and self-care, that are directly

relevant to the WIL placement experience, where students must draw on relational and self-management resources beyond academic skills alone. Response rates are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2: Positive response rates on PRQ and GSE by disability status.

Measure/Subscale	Without disability (%)	With disability (%)	Difference
PRQ Overall	72	60	-12
Sense of Purpose	75	62	-13
Positive Mental Attitude	65	53	-12
Connect with Others	72	56	-16
Determination	80	62	-18
Taking Control	73	66	-7
Looking After Yourself	68	65	-3
GSE (modified)	86	83	-3

Note. Positive response defined as combined score of 4 = Agree and 5 = Strongly Agree (PRQ) or 3 = Moderately True and 4 = Exactly True (GSE). *Differences exceeding 10 percentage points are highlighted as indicative patterns; see Methods for rationale.*.

It is important to clarify how resilience is conceptualized in this study. The authors do not treat resilience as a fixed individual trait or as an indicator of readiness that students either possess or lack. Rather, following Ungar (2012), the authors understand resilience as shaped by the interaction between individual capacities and the structural conditions that support or constrain them. In a WIL context, a student's resilience score reflects not only their personal resources but also the accessibility of their placement environment, the attitudes they encounter, and the extent to which they must expend energy managing barriers that their peers do not face. Lower resilience scores among students with disability may therefore indicate environments that deplete resilience rather than individuals who lack it. Both the GSE and PRQ measure individual-level constructs, self-efficacy and resilience, which could be interpreted as locating work-readiness within the person rather than within enabling structures. The authors use these measures not to attribute lower scores to individual deficit, but to identify patterns that the qualitative component then contextualizes. The interview data reveals how structural barriers, inaccessible environments, disclosure pressures, and attitudinal assumptions produce the conditions in which self-efficacy and resilience are experienced differently by students with disability.

Procedure

Following ethical clearance (HREC 2019/518), participants were invited to complete a survey via a link to a web-based survey platform (LimeSurvey). An information and consent form was presented at the outset, followed by the socio-demographic and background questionnaire, the GSE, and the PRQ. Upon completion of the survey, participants who identified as having lived experience with a disability were invited to participate in a recorded interview via Zoom.

Of the 14 participants with disability, two (14.3%) accepted a two-hour interview via Zoom. This participation rate is consistent with the barriers the study itself documents: students with disability face additional costs in making themselves visible, and agreeing to a recorded interview about placement experiences requires exactly the kind of disclosure both interviewees described as fraught. Both participants were re-presented with information regarding consent. Both participants were then provided with a series of semi-structured questions based on themes drawn from the GSE and PRQ. Interview questions explored student's experiences throughout their WIL placement across four

domains: (1) barriers and perceived employability (e.g., "Can you describe any barriers you faced during your placement?"); (2) general and specific challenges (e.g., "What was the most challenging aspect of your placement experience?"); (3) resources and support (e.g., "What support did you receive, and what additional support would have been helpful?"); and (4) recommendations for future students and programs (e.g., "What advice would you give to other students with disability undertaking WIL?").

Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis. Survey data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS v.26). Descriptive statistics were calculated for the GSE and PRQ scales and subscales, with participants grouped by disability status. Given the small sample size (n = 14 in the disability group), formal inferential statistical testing was not conducted. Differences of 10 percentage points or more were adopted as a pragmatic descriptive marker to identify patterns warranting discussion; this threshold balances sensitivity to potentially meaningful differences against the risk of over-interpreting small variations in a limited sample (Sandelowski, 2001). All observed differences should be interpreted as indicative rather than confirmatory. The authors acknowledge that the sample size constrains the generalizability of quantitative findings; the descriptive patterns serve primarily to contextualize the qualitative component.

Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative component functions as deep case-based inquiry (Stake, 1995), offering detailed insight into the structural conditions and lived experiences that underlie quantitative patterns. Case-based approaches are appropriate when the goal is to understand complex phenomena in depth rather than to establish statistical generalizability (Yin, 2018). Zoom interviews were transcribed verbatim using an online transcription service (Rev.com). Initial thematic mapping was supported by Leximancer v4.5, a text analytics tool that identifies conceptual themes through analysis of word frequency and co-occurrence patterns (Smith & Humphreys, 2006). Leximancer was used as a supportive tool to generate an initial thematic structure from the transcripts, rather than as the primary analytic driver. The software-generated thematic clusters were then substantially reviewed, refined, and reinterpreted by the research team through close reading of the transcripts, with theme labels and relationships between themes developed through researcher judgment. This approach combines the consistency of computational mapping with the interpretive depth that close engagement with participant accounts requires. Given the small number of interviewees (n = 2), the qualitative component functions as deep case-based inquiry rather than thematic analysis in the conventional sense. Findings are illustrative and explanatory, offering detailed insight into the structural conditions and lived experiences that may underlie quantitative patterns, rather than representative of the broader population of students with disability. This depth of case-based insight is particularly valuable for exposing the structural mechanisms through which WIL barriers operate mechanisms that aggregate-level data may obscure (Stake, 1995).

RESULTS

Quantitative Findings: Self-Efficacy and Resilience

On the Personal Resilience Questionnaire, 70% of respondents recorded a positive score (combined score of 4 = Agree and 5 = Strongly Agree). Students with disability recorded notably lower positive scores than their peers without disability across the overall scale and most subscales: overall resilience (60% vs. 72%), Sense of Purpose (62% vs. 75%), Positive Mental Attitude (53% vs. 65%), Connect with

Others (56% vs. 72%), and Determination (62% vs. 80%). The two subscales showing smaller differences were Taking Control (66% vs. 73%) and Looking After Yourself (65% vs. 68%).

Other demographic patterns were also observed. Older respondents (aged 25+) reported higher resilience than younger students (81% vs. 70%), and students who had not completed employment training reported higher resilience than those who had (72% vs. 64%).

On the modified General Self-Efficacy Scale, 85% of respondents rated positively (combined score of 3 = Moderately True and 4 = Exactly True). Students without disability again rated higher than those with disability, though the difference was smaller (86% vs. 83%) compared to the 12 percentage-point gap on the resilience scale for the same respondents. Males rated higher than females (91% vs. 84%), older students higher than younger (89% vs. 84%), and those with more formal education higher than those with less (14+ years: 90% vs. 10–14 years: 84%).

The consistent pattern across both scales, in which students with disability scored lower, with larger differences on resilience subscales that measure social connection, sense of purpose, and determination, provides the quantitative context for the qualitative exploration that follows. However, these descriptive patterns should be interpreted cautiously given the small sample size and absence of inferential testing.

Qualitative Findings: Placement Experiences

To better understand the experiences underlying the quantitative patterns, thematic analysis was undertaken on the interview transcripts of the two students with disability who participated in follow-up interviews. Themes were clustered into two broad groups: those relating to physical and medical aspects of disability, and those relating to social dimensions. Consistent with the social model that informs this study, social themes were substantially more prevalent.

Physical and Accessibility Barriers

Both students identified physical barriers that affected their placement experience. Interview A described the challenge of mobility: "Ultimately getting us out of the house is highly important … but it's really difficult to get out." She explained that even with assisted wheelchair access, dependence on others for physical assistance remained a barrier to autonomy. Interview B described difficulty with temperature regulation in a shared workplace, "I get really dizzy when hot and it's so hot in the office," but felt unable to request adjustments, illustrating how physical needs become social barriers when workplace norms make accommodation requests feel transgressive.

Social and Interpersonal Dimensions

The social and interpersonal dimensions of placement experience encompassed several interconnected themes: attitudes and assumptions, community and support, perspectives on work, managing, and the placement experience itself. Both students reflected on how attitudes and assumptions shaped their placement experiences. Interview A described being able to distinguish between genuine engagement and performative inclusion: "I can tell the difference between someone who's listening to me as a human being" compared to someone "who's humoring me because they don't want to seem ableist or, you know, be told off for not doing the right thing. It's a big difference." Interview B took a more introspective view: "The more I interact with disability politics and stuff the better I feel about myself and about working and studying."

Community and Support

Both students emphasized the importance of having a support network during placement. They reported that being able to check in and debrief about their experiences contributed to positive perceptions. They expressed a desire to have friends, peers, or other supportive people at the placement site, someone to "debrief and talk to about it." Interview A also articulated the tension around disclosure and help-seeking that pervades the literature: "Asking for help is rocking the boat to a lot of us because we don't know if that makes us vulnerable."

Perspectives on Work

Both interviewees held complex views about employment. Interview B described being asked to write a safety plan at a previous workplace,

> What should we do with [Interview B]? And I had to put my photo on it and they put it around the office. I had mixed feelings about that because it's kind of embarrassing … and it made me feel that I'm maybe like a liability.

Looking ahead, Interview B questioned whether employment was even feasible: "I'm going to finish uni and is there even any point applying for jobs if I can only work for eight hours a week?" They also described the emotional distance between university and professional practice: "It's such a big jump to go from like ranting about policy or … human rights or whatever at uni and then going to someone's house and talking to them."

Managing

This theme encompassed three sub-themes. Managing energy: both students described the finite energy available for daily functioning, a phenomenon widely described in disability communities as "spoon theory" (Miserandino, 2003), which uses the metaphor of a limited supply of spoons to represent the rationing of energy across tasks that non-disabled people take for granted. Interview B commented, "It's been pretty isolating because I only have a certain amount of energy and I have to dedicate all of it to uni." Interview A used the spoons metaphor directly: "I suffered severe depression a few years ago, where I had a five spoons cap." Managing expectations: students anticipated poor treatment. Interview A said, "They shouldn't have to know that I'm autistic to treat me like a person." Managing self: while Interview B took a more negative view, Interview A tried to frame her disability as an asset: "I come at the world from a different angle to a holistic person and I think that a new fresh pair of eyes can really provide a difference."

The Placement Experience

Both students began their placements with trepidation. Interview B reflected, "In previous like workplaces, I've been like, I'm not going to say anything about it, but then it just like all kind of blows up." Ultimately, both had positive placement experiences. Interview A's placement was with an animal shelter where she connected with other volunteers and enjoyed the work: "Animals all treat you the same, which is wonderful." Interview B found that openness about disability improved their experience: "I now just tell people about my disability, like straight up and it makes it easier."

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study contribute to an emerging but still limited understanding of how students with disability experience WIL placements. The quantitative data reveal a consistent pattern: students with disability report lower resilience and marginally lower self-efficacy than their peers. The qualitative data, while drawn from only two participants, offer insight into the structural and social conditions that may produce these patterns, conditions that standard WIL preparation and design do not typically address.

The Individual and the Structural

The quantitative instruments used in this study, the GSE and PRQ, capture individual perceptions of capability and coping. Lower scores among students with disability could be read as evidence of lesser readiness for professional settings. However, the qualitative data complicate this reading substantially. Both interviewees demonstrated considerable agency, self-awareness, and resourcefulness. Interview A's capacity to distinguish between genuine and performative inclusion, and Interview B's evolving strategy of proactive disclosure, suggest sophisticated navigation of complex social environments, precisely the kind of professional competence WIL aims to develop.

When the quantitative patterns are read alongside these qualitative accounts, a different interpretation emerges. The lower scores appear to reflect not individual deficit but the cumulative effect of navigating environments not designed to accommodate difference. The energy management challenges, the reluctance to request accommodations, the expectation of poor treatment - these are structural conditions, not personal limitations. Neither the quantitative nor qualitative data alone can confirm this interpretation; it is their combination that makes it plausible. This reading aligns with Dollinger, Ajjawi, et al.'s (2024) finding that students with disability bear a disproportionate "burden of responsibility" (p. 2219) in WIL settings, and with the broader social model of disability that locates disadvantage in structures rather than individuals (Brett, 2016).

For WIL practitioners and researchers, this has methodological implications. Measures of self-efficacy and resilience are widely used in WIL research to evaluate program effectiveness. These findings suggest that without attending to the structural conditions that shape these measures, such evaluations may inadvertently reproduce deficit framings of students with disability. Future research should complement individual-level measures with assessment of placement accessibility, host organization preparedness, and the extent to which accommodations are available without requiring disclosure.

Disclosure as a Design Problem

A recurring theme across both interviews was the fraught nature of disclosure: the decision about whether, when, and how to reveal one's disability in a professional context. This finding resonates strongly with recent research. Dollinger et al. (2023) found that students with disability were concerned about how their conditions would be received by host organizations, and Lindsay et al. (2019) documented the anxieties around workplace disclosure among young people with disability.

What the data adds is insight into how disclosure functions as a structural barrier within WIL specifically. Interview A's observation that "asking for help is rocking the boat" and Interview B's evolution from concealment to proactive disclosure both illustrate that the current WIL model places the burden of inclusion on the student. The workplace does not ask what students need; students must decide whether it is safe to tell. This represents a design failure, not a personal failing. As Lawlis et al.

(2024) argue, host organizations often lack the knowledge and frameworks to provide inclusive WIL without being prompted by disclosure, creating a system in which equitable treatment is contingent on students making themselves vulnerable.

Positive Outcomes and the Placement Context

It is important to note that both interviewees ultimately reported positive placement experiences. Interview A found meaningful connection through her animal shelter placement; Interview B developed a more confident approach to self-disclosure. These outcomes suggest that WIL can serve students with disability well when conditions are favorable.

However, the conditions that produced these positive outcomes were largely individual rather than systemic. Interview A's positive experience depended on the particular environment of the animal shelter, a setting characterized by less hierarchical social dynamics and lower demands for sustained interpersonal performance. Interview B's improved approach to disclosure was a personally developed strategy, not one facilitated by placement design. Neither student described placement structures that proactively supported their participation; their success was achieved through individual resourcefulness within systems that did not account for their needs.

It is also worth noting that the WIL modality in this study, service learning, involving community-based placements, may shape some findings in ways that differ from other WIL contexts. Community partner placements are typically framed around civic responsibility and mutual benefit rather than purely professional performance and may involve less hierarchical workplace dynamics than corporate or clinical settings. Interview A's animal shelter placement, for instance, offered a less pressured interpersonal environment than an industry internship might. However, the core barriers identified: disclosure pressures, energy management, attitudinal assumptions, and the absence of proactive accommodation, are structural features of WIL design rather than artefacts of any particular modality. Future research should examine whether these barriers operate with similar intensity across industry internships, clinical placements, and project-based WIL.

This finding underscores the risk of WIL programs that claim inclusive outcomes without examining whether those outcomes result from inclusive design or from the resilience of individual students despite the absence of such design. As Slee (2019) asks, "How might we rise above the institutional and ontological spaces we presently occupy, to progressively form the knowledge, relationships and institutional arrangements that eschew exclusion and instate the dignity of social belonging?" (p. 916). The answer, for WIL, lies in designing placement systems that do not rely on students with disability to absorb and overcome structural inadequacies.

Implications for Inclusive Work-Integrated Learning Design

The findings from this study carry specific implications for how WIL programs are designed, brokered, and supervised. The authors identify three areas where the current data suggest actionable change.

First, placement brokerage and host preparation. The findings, consistent with Mackaway et al. (2024), indicate that host organizations are often unprepared for inclusive WIL. WIL coordinators should build disability awareness and inclusive supervision training into host preparation as standard practice, not as a response to individual disclosures. This means providing host supervisors with practical guidance on accessible workplaces, flexible task allocation, and proactive communication about available support

before any student arrives. The goal is to create placement environments where accommodations are embedded in normal practice rather than triggered by disclosure.

Second, structured support and check-in mechanisms. Both interviewees emphasized the importance of having people to debrief with during placement. WIL programs should build regular, structured check-ins into the placement cycle, not only between the student and the academic supervisor, but also through peer support mechanisms such as placement cohort meetings or buddy systems. For students with disability, who may be navigating additional barriers that their peers do not face, these structures provide a space to process experiences and seek advice without the vulnerability of formal disclosure. WIL modalities that already embed reflective practice, such as service learning, where structured reflection is a curriculum requirement, may provide a model for how such support can be integrated into placement design more broadly.

Third, disclosure-free design in practice. The data show that the current WIL model makes equitable treatment contingent on students making themselves vulnerable through disclosure. Shifting this requires WIL programs to adopt what might be called 'disclosure-free' design principles, placement structures in which the most common accommodations (flexible hours, regular check-ins, clear communication about expectations and support, physical accessibility audits) are built into every placement by default, regardless of whether any student has disclosed a disability. This is consistent with universal design for learning principles (CAST, 2018; Rao et al., 2024) and benefits not only students with disability but all students who may face barriers to full participation, including those with caring responsibilities, chronic health conditions, or socioeconomic pressures. WIL assessment practices should also be reviewed to ensure they do not inadvertently penalize students who manage energy constraints or require workplace accommodations.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. The convenience sample was drawn from a single WIL course (using a service learning modality) at one Australian university, limiting generalizability across WIL modalities and institutional contexts. The disability sub-sample (n = 14) is small, though it is statistically over-represented relative to the general university population.

The most significant limitation is the qualitative sample. Only two of the fourteen students with disability accepted the interview invitation, and the depth of insight they provided cannot be assumed to represent the range of experiences among students with disability. Their accounts are illustrative, offering rich detail about how specific barriers and strategies operate, but they do not constitute a basis for claims about prevalence or typicality.

The quantitative analysis is descriptive rather than inferential. With only 14 respondents in the disability group, observed patterns can be strongly influenced by one or two individuals, and estimates based on such small numbers are less stable. Percentage differences should be interpreted as indicative patterns rather than statistically confirmed effects, and findings are contextually specific to this sample rather than generalizable.

This study was conducted in 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability findings (2023), and the Universities Accord review (O'Kane et al., 2024). While the structural barriers identified, disclosure pressures, inaccessible workplaces, attitudinal assumptions, are enduring rather than circumstantial, the WIL landscape has changed significantly since data collection. The pandemic accelerated remote

and flexible WIL delivery, which may have alleviated some physical accessibility barriers while potentially creating new ones: digital exclusion, reduced opportunities for the face-to-face social connection that both interviewees valued, and less visibility of disability needs in virtual settings. The Disability Royal Commission's findings on institutional responsibility have also shifted the policy context within which universities design and deliver WIL. Future research should examine how these developments have affected WIL provision for students with disability.

A larger study with sufficient power for inferential testing would strengthen the evidence base. Additionally, the modification of the GSE for placement contexts, while justified on ecological validity grounds, means that the instrument's psychometric properties may differ from the validated original.

The authors also acknowledge that although the authorship team includes a co-author with lived experience of disability, her perspective is one of many. Future research should, as a matter of course, include people with disability as members of the research team, not only to broaden perspectives but to ensure that research design itself reflects the priorities of people with lived experience.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated how students with disability experience a WIL placement course, using quantitative measures of self-efficacy and resilience alongside qualitative accounts of placement experience. The findings reveal a consistent pattern: students with disability report lower resilience across multiple domains and navigate placement environments shaped by barriers that standard WIL design does not address.

The qualitative data provide particular insight into three areas with implications for WIL practice. First, disclosure remains a significant barrier, with the current system placing the burden of inclusion on students rather than on program design. WIL programs should embed inclusive practices into placement brokerage and host preparation so that equitable treatment does not require disclosure as a precondition. Second, students with disability demonstrate considerable agency and resourcefulness in navigating placement challenges, qualities that constitute genuine professional competence, even though they may not register as such on standard self-efficacy measures. WIL programs and researchers should be cautious about interpreting lower self-efficacy or resilience scores among students with disability as evidence of lesser readiness. Third, support networks matter. Both interviewees emphasized the importance of having people to debrief with during placement, suggesting that WIL programs should build peer support and regular check-in mechanisms into placement design as standard practice.

More broadly, these findings contribute to a growing body of research (Boye, 2024; Dollinger et al., 2023; Garant-Jones et al., 2024; Wall et al., 2026) that demonstrates the need for WIL to move beyond a default assumption about who the WIL student is. If WIL is to deliver on its promise of employability for all students, its design must account for the full range of students it serves. This means not only making placements accessible but actively designing WIL systems that recognize the structural conditions shaping participation. The students in this study showed that WIL can work for them, but they also showed that it currently works despite the system, not because of it.

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Disclosure of the Use of GenAI

Generative AI (Claude, Anthropic) was used to assist with structural revision and editing of this manuscript. The research design, data collection, analysis, and all empirical claims and their meanings are entirely the work of the authors. All AI-assisted text was reviewed and edited by the authors before submission.

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