

A regional WIL model: Sharing a new approach

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As work-integrated learning (WIL) becomes embedded in the higher education sector, it presents an unprecedented opportunity for practitioners to learn from one another. The challenges of implementing a WIL program are widely known among the WIL community. These challenges often relate to the flexibility and diversity afforded models both within and between institutions. Many institutions have begun internally sharing practices; however, missing in the literature is circulation of this information to facilitate learning across domains. This paper is positioned in the nexus of WIL cross-institutional dissemination. It is hoped that this paper will achieve two aims, the dissemination and application of an Australian regional WIL model. First, a regional Internship Program is detailed through the key areas of purpose, pedagogy, processes, design and assessments. Second, application of the model is offered through an empirical examination of students' reflections. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 2011, 12(3), 163-174)

Key words: accounting students; internship; reflection; student learning; work-integrated learning

INTRODUCTION

Internship placements are an established approach to work-integrated learning (WIL) that offers undergraduate students the opportunity to learn their discipline through practice (Clark, 2003; Mello, 2006; Tanniru & Agarwal, 2002). There is, however, diversity in the ways internship programs are established across disciplines and across tertiary institutions. This diversity has led to differences in such areas as structure, assessment, supervision and purpose.

Much of the literature on internship placements and other WIL activities, focuses on student's perceptions and expectations (Cannon & Arnold, 1998; Cook, Parker & Pettijohn, 2004; Knouse & Fontenot, 2008; Rothman, 2003; Stasz & Brewer, 1998; Walo, 2001), employer perspectives and feedback (Bailey, Hughes & Barr, 2000; Dixon, Cunningham, Sagas, Turner & Kent, 2005; Harris and Zhao, 2004; McDonough, Rodriguez & Prior-Miller, 2009; Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher & Pretto, 2009; Sapp & Zhang, 2009), or employability (Callanan & Benzing, 2004; Gault Redington & Schlager, 2000; Knouse & Fontenot, 2008; Smith et al., 2009). While the WIL community agree that there are many challenges in establishing such programs, challenges are particularly pronounced where the context requires a unique WIL approach (Alpert, Heaney & Kuhn, 2009) and much discussion should be held on how the success would be measured for such WIL programs (Abeysekera, 2006; Brown, 2010). Many institutions have begun internally sharing practices through WIL working parties or introducing WIL across the curriculum (Brown, 2010; Gamble, Patrick &

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Peach, 2010; Jackson, 2010). Currently missing from the WIL literature is a discourse of sharing WIL philosophies and programs (Brown, 2010) to facilitate learning and reflection on current practices.

The purpose of this paper is the dissemination and application of a regional Australian WIL model. The paper is structured in alignment with these two aims. First, a unique internship model is examined. Dissemination of this model is presented through considering the processes, principles and pedagogy that underpin the associated procedures and practices. Second, an empirical study analysing accounting student's learning through reflections on the program is presented. Preliminary results suggest that students reveal learning pertaining to their workplace preparedness, understanding of accounting principles and taught concepts, generic skill enhancement and consolidation of accounting as their chosen professional career.

SHARING A NEW WIL APPROACH

The Commerce Internship Program (CIP) developed and implemented at the University of Wollongong, Australia, offers a model for student engagement through practical experience. Since the program began in 2008, over 230 students have been placed in over 50 regional and national organisations. Each semester, while both student and industry demand has risen, CIP has prioritised quality over increasing numbers. Central to the program is a philosophy of learning and reflection, which is embedded through structure, processes and assessment design. In the interest of cross-institutional practice sharing, the following sections delineate CIP key features and practices.

Purpose

The aim of the Internship Program is to provide students with a valuable learning experience in a professional and supported environment. Developed in conjunction with industry, CIP strongly emphasises meeting the needs of its three stakeholders; the students, the host organisations and the university.

Students, host organisations and the faculty, who represent the university, are strongly linked by the connection to learning and graduate outcomes, as illustrated in Figure 1 (Cord & Clements, 2010). Students are provided with the opportunity for placement in host organisations and, in turn, contribute to their host organisation by performing tasks that enhance operations or contribute to specific projects within the organisation. The faculty, further informed by current industry experience and student engagement with organisations, is better equipped to develop knowledgeable graduates and may facilitate collaborative research opportunities. Driven by the key attributes of quality, flexibility and sustainability, the program further embeds the university's graduate outcomes and helps to ensure that graduates are socially responsible, innovative, flexible, communicators, connected, and informed (Faculty of Commerce, 2008). The feedback loop is instrumental to monitoring program effectiveness and learning through feedback and experiences.

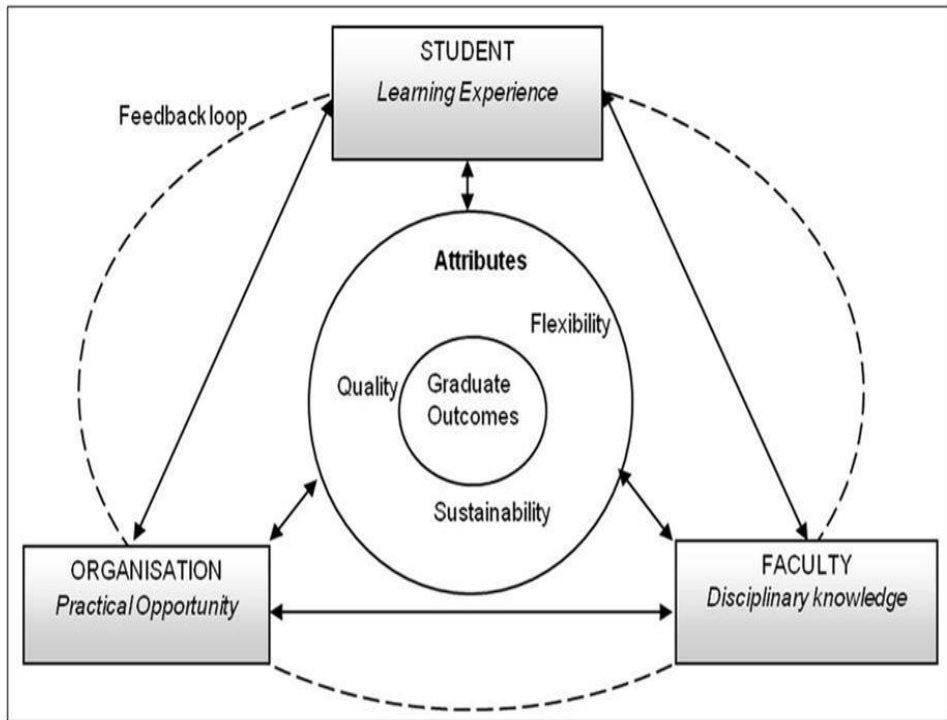


FIGURE 1:
CIP Stakeholder Engagement Model (Cord & Clements, 2010)

Pedagogy

The way students are introduced and assimilated into a new work environment has the potential to influence the effectiveness of their learning (Cord, Sykes & Clements, 2011; Le Maistre & Paré, 2004; Louis, 1980). A carefully designed and supported transition from higher education to the workplace can assist in producing an effective learning environment (Cord et al., 2011). Academic facilitators of the program believe in providing academic and professional support through regular contact with students. Workplace supervisors are briefed on the learning philosophies of the program and are recognised for their significant contributions towards students’ personal and professional development.

Foregrounding learning and promoting the importance of learning beyond university (Boud & Falchikov, 2007) are integral to CIP. Beyond the walls of formal education, students must engage in work and life as active participants, “they have to determine what is to be learned, how it is to be learned and how to judge whether they have learned it or not” (Boud, 2007, p.18). CIP provides an opportunity for students to develop a new set of work-related tools including skills such as effective communication, team work and problem solving (Bohloko & Mahlomaholo, 2008) through practice and reflection. The processes and design of CIP are underpinned by this pedagogy that focuses on support and learning for the long term.

Placement Design

Students participate in 16 days of placement at their host organisation during semester two. The schedule of the placement days is negotiated with the host organisation and student to fit with the student's study timetable and the organisation's needs. Generally, two days per week for eight weeks is agreed upon. The activities performed in the workplace are based on the requirements of the host organisation. CIP is an elective subject that, with authorisation, can be substituted for a third year compulsory subject. CIP is open to second and third year Bachelor of Commerce students, as well as students of other faculties within the university who are studying towards a major in Commerce. Upon request by host organisations, students from informatics, media and design have also been invited to apply.

Processes

The CIP process begins one semester in advance of the student completing their practical placement. For the purpose of clarity for this description, the preparation semester is referred to as semester one, and the practical placement, semester two. CIP runs the two processes, preparation and practical placement, concurrently. That is, in any one semester, the academic staff is balancing students both on placements and in preparation for the following semester. CIP runs both autumn and spring sessions at the University of Wollongong.

Semester one involves marketing, recruiting and consolidating the program for the following semester. The program is marketed internally to students through five minute presentations in targeted lectures, emails and social networking notices. Previous students are also notified to encourage peers to apply. Students are invited to apply online, through a purposefully designed system for the program, for generic roles based on their discipline of study. Students attach an electronic copy of a cover letter and résumé to their application. Students are encouraged to see the university's Careers Services for advice and assistance. Externally, CIP academic coordinators visit new and existing industry partners. While approaching existing host organisations, CIP coordinators visit students currently on placement, seek feedback and confirm placements for the following session. Host organisations accepting students complete a placement description and conditions template.

Students are short-listed against descriptions based on their application and academic advice from the nominated discipline. Student grades are not requested; however, attainment of first year is essential. Up to three students are invited to participate in an interview with a member of the host organisation. At this point, the host organisation, description and requirements are disclosed to the student, and students can decide on acceptance of the interview. The interview takes place on campus and is approximately 10 minutes. A host organisation representative interviews each student and makes the final selection. Outside the interview room, the program coordinator offers the students support and is a sounding board for any questions. Reflective questions are offered through the program's website for each student to consider their strengths and areas they need to improve. All students are notified of acceptance status. Unsuccessful students are encouraged to reflect on the process and invited to apply again the following semester.

Support and Celebration

At the beginning of semester two, students attend an initial pre-placement meeting at the host organisation's premises with the subject coordinator from the university and an allocated workplace mentor. This meeting orients the student with the organisation and addresses any legal obligations, such as Intellectual Property, insurance and confidentiality. Throughout the placement, students and their CIP coordinator remain in regular contact through the e-Learning forum, text messages, informal face-to-face discussions and placement visitations. In recognition of the support offered by workplace mentors and the host organisation's commitment to community engagement and students' development, an annual CIP breakfast is held. Industry partners, university top management, local media, selected academics and internship students are invited to the event. An elected host organisation and several students present their experiences and host organisations are recognised with a certificate for contributing to students' development and regional collaboration.

Assessments

Assessments are conducted online and focus on learning in the workplace. Assessments comprise: a daily e-log (15%), three generic modules (60%) and a final reflective journal (25%). All e-logs are due the Monday after an internship day, to maintain regular contact, offer support and feedback, and comment of reflective techniques. The modules and reflective journal include two e-readings and structured questions, to encouraging reflection and to draw together experiences. Two interactive lectures are held. The first lecture manages expectations, covers workplace issues and introduces the purpose of reflection through reflective exercises, discussions and presentations by experts in this area. Students are expected to complete a non-assessable compulsory online test that evaluates their knowledge on equal employment matters. The second lecture is held at the end of session and at the completion of most placements. While the majority of formal reflection up until this point has been individual, this lecture serves as an opportunity to share reflections with others to enhance the learning experience (Moon, 1999). This lecture offers enjoyable activities and stimulates group discussions to promote collective reflection, which is critical for professional development (Reynolds & Vince, 2004).

While many WIL programs emphasise the need for students to learn and reflect on their practices, a mirror must be shown to the academics behind this endorsement. Sharing of practices and models will not only enable practitioners to reflect on their own work, but it may also enhance student learning opportunities. The next section explores the application of this WIL approach through examining students' learning as reported through reflective journals. This exploration forms part of the feedback loop presented in Figure 1. The authors anticipated that these insights would provide a greater understanding of students' perceptions and learning in the program and add valuable feedback to the structure and intentions of CIP.

ACCOUNTING STUDENTS' REFLECTIVE LEARNING: APPLICATION OF WIL APPROACH

A preliminary empirical study was employed to investigate students learning and the effectiveness of the reflective journal assessment. Given the diversity of commerce disciplines, the authors selected students from an accounting discipline to minimise any cross-discipline ambiguity and maintain a small, focused study. Data was collected in the autumn and spring semesters of 2009 (n=16). Qualitative analysis was undertaken to discern common underlying themes in the students' reflective journal assessments. Reflective journals can gather rich self-reported insights into students' learning experiences (Smith, Clegg, Lawrence & Todd, 2007) and reflections on the underlying dimensions of work practices (Clegg, 2000). Using open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), a technique employed to reveal common themes, responses were coded across the dataset for key terms, expressions or phrases. The authors first coded the dataset individually. This approach was selected to minimise the risk of overlooking important concepts. Next, the codes were collectively coded and compared and interpreted to identify shared learning insights. The authors discussed and resolved any concerning expressions by considering the meaning in the given context, ultimately agreeing on the themes that had emerged in the data. The analysis revealed four key themes; workplace preparedness; practical understandings of accounting principles and concepts; generic skill enhancement; and, consolidation of career in accounting. Each of these themes, however, were underpinned by what were observed as insights into learning across two diverse contexts, illuminating the structured, generic and propositional characteristics of higher education and the practical, emergent and contextualisation inherent in the workplace.

Workplace preparedness

The first common theme identified connected with student's workplace preparedness. The transition from higher education to the workplace is made increasingly difficult due to the nature of learning in these two diverse learning contexts (Le Maistre & Paré, 2004). The results indicated that that this WIL program imparted a sense of confidence during this transition through illuminating student's inner potential. For instance as one student describes; "overall this was a very positive experience and one that has motivated me to push my limits to fulfil the potential that I possess" (Student 15). In stating readiness for the workplace, this type of affect statement was typically revealed, indicating that the transition was both physical and emotional.

A growing awareness of self is critical to being prepared for the challenges of the workplace. Greater self awareness can allow students to respond with more flexibility and confidence to the demands and increasing pressure of the workplace, which is typically different to the routine and structured formal learning espoused in higher education courses. This student's comments are reminiscent of the reflexive and affect statements of awareness found through the analysis:

By doing this placement I have also developed a greater sense of self-worth. On the final day of our placement the finance department took us out for lunch to thank us for our contributions. At lunch it was made clear just how valuable my contribution was, and I now see that I can contribute to organisations. (Student 3)

This comment further sheds light on the importance of support and encouragement during placements. Widely recognised organisational management strategies have attested motivational strategies as more effective of employee productivity than strategies based on structure (Oldham, 1976). Structure perhaps, in this instance, could be reminiscent of an inherent characteristic of higher education learning context. Our findings indicate that these management principles could offer interesting insights into understanding interns in the workplace, and potentially present an area worthy of further exploration in WIL.

Students also commonly identified how their learning moved beyond the application of knowledge into workplace practices and insights into organisational culture. One student recalls, "...I quickly found out that placement was about much more than just the industry I wanted to work in. Placement taught me about discipline and how to work in a professional environment" (Student 15). This learning about the workplace can only be achieved through contextual workplace learning that classroom simulations cannot replicate. In this way, WIL offers students an opportunity to experience an organisational environment to prepare them for employment and potentially a lifetime of reflection and learning upon graduation. Another student articulates this point:

I perceive one of the major weaknesses of a student leaving and working for an organisation is the lack of understanding of workplace culture and practices. In undertaking this internship I have been able to experience the work environment and grasp an understanding of what is required of me and how to adjust to these new situations. This will benefit me in the long run as I will be able to adjust to any new organisation more effectively than if I hadn't undertaken this opportunity. (Student 3)

This insight demonstrates the value of first hand experience in the workplace. This learning prepares students for real work-related challenges and environments in which they will be learning and participating during their professional career.

Practical understanding of accounting principles & concepts

The second common theme generated by the reflective journals was an appreciation for and understanding of the practical application of accounting principles and concepts. This theme addresses student's insights from practical understandings of the accounting profession often in direct comparison to their experiences in accounting courses. This evaluation of learning environments focussed on difference, as the following student exemplifies:

I was able to appreciate the difference from just memorising to understanding when it comes to learning. Which at times, especially in the case for studying for an exam, it is usual to just memorise concepts, however by completing projects/tasks while at the internship I have been able to appreciate why understanding a concept is more important. (Student 11)

The underlying current of the structured and propositional nature of knowing and learning in higher education is brought forward.

Challenging existing assumptions about the workplace was prevalent in the student's reflective journals. Revealing the diversity and contextual nature of the workplace, one student states, "The underlying assumption with most accounting jobs from an individual's

perspective is that it's virtually all number crunching, however... within public practice the roles are quite diverse... [as in] the particular roles I've done within the organisation" (Student 1). These assumptions were also addressed in 'light bulb' moments in the journals, where students made connections between what they had learnt at university and what they were doing in the internship. This new information has provided an insight into their studies, "I have learned that it is important to understand why I am being taught what I am" (Student 15). A few students also had these moments beyond accounting concepts and into the purpose of higher education. Coming to understand the importance of accounting education theory and putting their learning into perspective, a student says, "I have realised that it's not the grades that matters most, but being able to understand what you are taught and apply it in real life" (Student 7). This focus on grades is a feature of the structured and regularised practices of higher education to assess and evaluate students' knowledge and determine their knowledge in comparison to systematised categories. The absence of these generic, evaluative measures replaced by merit for what you do in the workplace was noticed by several students.

Generic skill enhancement

The third common theme was the development of generic or *soft* skills, which are those skills that are not technical or related to discipline knowledge. Therefore, while the internship proved beneficial to understanding technical, propositional accounting concepts, it also provided an opportunity to practice skills that are typically identified as employability skills (Smith, Brooks, Lichtenburg, McIlveen, Torjul & Tyler, 2009) or soft skills (Cord, Bowrey & Clements, 2010). From the range of generic skills reflected on, team work skills and communication skills were the most prominent. This student places teamwork in the context of the two learning environments:

the team experience in a professional setting was quite different [from university]... I was not able to complete a team project by myself as this was not only too broad and difficult, but it required specific knowledge which was beyond my grasp and expertise. (Student 2)

Similarly, another student discovered "the more time I spent at the internship I realised that I did not have to only rely on myself and that in fact I needed to use the team to assist" (Student 10). Although in these two examples the workplace demonstrated a collaborative working environment, for some students the workplace demanded more responsibility and independence.

The enhancement of communication skills was revealed in the reflective journals, both in association with teamwork opportunities and due to workplace challenges. For one student, developing communication skills stemmed from the need to be noticed and take responsibility:

At the start of the internship I was very quiet, independently and conscientiously moving through the work and waiting for more work to be assigned, as I became more confident I began proactively requested and suggesting work, but given my nature I had to push myself to be more forward or self promoting. (Student 10)

The need to interact and be noticed by employees, clients and upper management such as CEOs, also offered opportunities to grow these new skills while overcoming personal barriers:

Even though I had previously possessed these through work experience... I believe that the internship allowed me to enhance these skills as it forced me out of my comfort zone. For example, meeting senior partners and managers was extremely intimidating for me on a personal level however I was forced to adapt to this as I was required to interact with them constantly in order to perform my tasks. (Student 3)

Consolidation of chosen profession

The final common theme that emerged from analysing accounting students' reflective journals was a common agreement that accounting was the right career choice. With the exception of one student who indicated graduate studies such as honours or masters, most students indicated that becoming a professional in the accounting field after graduation was their intention. The internship program reinforced this choice through exposing students to contextual, practical practices of accountants. One student emphasises the notion of grounding accounting through workplace experiences through reflecting on the industry of the host organisation, "...not only has my overall experience reinforced that I have chosen the right career path, but it has also provided me an opportunity to see how well I would fit into the public sector" (Student 2). For other students, confirmation of their chosen profession has also been linked to greater motivation towards entering the workforce and for university studies:

After working in the field that I have been studying, my belief that I have chosen the right career path has been reaffirmed. I have thoroughly enjoyed my time performing accounting practices and solving problems with my industry knowledge. By knowing that this is the course for me I am more motivated to work harder and achieve higher. (Student 3)

Students also demonstrated that how they perceived their employability and competitiveness in the marketplace since the internship has been modified, "having this experience will help me further my career prospects because it has given me experience in my industry, which will be vital in securing an accounting job as it makes me more employable and qualified to take on a graduate role" (Student 11). The reflective journals commonly revealed that students are thinking about this transition into the workplace and are doing so with a grounded example of the industry and the practices of an accounting professional.

CONCLUSION

While the analysis revealed four common themes that support student learning in the program and through reflective journals, these were often demonstrated through a common reflection on the diversity of the learning contexts of higher education and the workplace. Further articulating these differences and how to manage learning across domains would greatly benefit students, supervisors and deliverers of WIL programs to better prepare students for the challenges they may face in transitioning into the workplace.

Given the degree of the differences in WIL programs and the challenges of implementing such programs, a discourse must be introduced in the literature to initiate a community of practice around collective sharing. Dissemination of WIL models and staff experiences can present opportunities for cross-institutional learning. Sharing reflections and WIL approaches can also benefit our professional practices (Moon, 1999) and student outcomes (Brown, 2010). Sharing can help redefine or clarify the purpose of a program, or aid reflection on structure or assessments to ensure alignment with university goals. This paper is constituted in a cross-institutional dissemination nexus, through presenting a WIL model at a regional university and examining student learning through reflective journals.

Further opportunities in the area of WIL learning may respond to the call to use organisational study's theoretical frameworks to illuminate students knowing and learning across the domains. While the results presented in this paper concern accounting students, further research could investigate the learning outcomes of additional disciplines. The sampling method utilised may present as a limitation of the paper; however, the authors intend on using this as a comparative basis from which a longitudinal study may be carried out.

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ABOUT THE JOURNAL

The Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative education (APJCE) arose from a desire to produce an international forum for discussion of cooperative education, or work integrated learning (WIL), issues for practitioners in the Asia-Pacific region and is intended to provide a mechanism for the dissemination of research, best practice and innovation in work-integrated learning. The journal maintains close links to the biennial Asia-Pacific regional conferences conducted by the World Association for Cooperative Education. In recognition of international trends in information technology, APJCE is produced solely in electronic form. Published papers are available as PDF files from the website, and manuscript submission, reviewing and publication is electronically based. In 2010, Australian Research Council (ARC), which administers the Excellence in Research (ERA) ranking system, awarded APJCE a 'B' ERA ranking (top 10-20%).

Cooperative education/WIL in the journal is taken to be work-based learning in which the time spent in the workplace forms an integrated part of an academic program of study. More specifically, cooperative education/WIL can be described as a strategy of applied learning which is a structured program, developed and supervised either by an educational institution in collaboration with an employer or industry grouping, or by an employer or industry grouping in collaboration with an educational institution. An essential feature is that relevant, productive work is conducted as an integral part of a student's regular program, and the final assessment contains a work-based component. Cooperative education/WIL programs are commonly highly structured and possess formal (academic and employer) supervision and assessment. The work is productive, in that the student undertakes meaningful work that has economic value or definable benefit to the employer. The work should have clear linkages with, or add to, the knowledge and skill base of the academic program.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR CONTRIBUTORS

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