The value of workplace learning in the first year for university students from under-represented groups

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Workplace learning (WPL) is widely accepted in universities as a valuable component of educating for professional practices. Most often though, the focus of WPL is on helping students transition into the workforce, neglecting the role it can play in helping students transition into university. Using an online questionnaire and interviews, a study was conducted with undergraduate students enrolled in a regional Australian university to better understand their experiences of WPL in the first year of their studies. Findings from this study showed that although there are challenges associated with students undertaking WPL in the first year of university courses, WPL experiences were highly valued by students. Findings also highlighted that WPL had potential as a retention strategy for first year students in general, and students from under-represented groups in particular. *(Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education, 2014, 15(1), 55-67)*

For several reasons, there has been, in recent years, greater focus on workplace learning (WPL) and the first year experience of undergraduate students in universities. The interest in integrating WPL in universities has increased with government and industry's imposition of economic outcomes —including producing work-ready graduates— as the dominant terms of reference for participation in university (Cooper, Orrell, & Bowden, 2010; Hager & Holland, 2006; Coll & Zegwaard, 2011). In Australia, the interest in the first year experience has been amplified with the introduction of uncapped student loads and the call for wider participation in university education —especially by under-represented student groups. With this paper, the value WPL in the first year of undergraduate university courses is explored. Based on findings from a pilot study conducted at a regional university in Australia, WPL's potential role in keeping students from under-represented groups enrolled and in developing their professional identity is discussed.

Workplace Learning

WPL is also known as work-integrated learning, practicums, professional experience, internships, intra mural and extra-mural placements, fieldwork and clinical placements. Within the Australian regional university where the study reported on here was conducted, it is understood as an experience that allows students to learn through direct implementation of their professional roles in real workplace settings –may it be in on-campus or off-campus facilities. It is also defined as a learning experience that involves supervision and the provision of safeguards by the host organization to ensure duty of care towards students, as well as towards their clients (Adams, 2012).

WPL is widely accepted as a valuable component of educating for professional practices in universities. By improving the employability of Australians and averting the predicted national skills shortage, WPL is seen as universities' way of contributing towards the government's ambition of ensuring a buoyant economy and commitment to equity (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency, 2012; Precision Consultancy, 2007; Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009).

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As the learning and teaching components of curricula that occur in real world contexts of professional practice, WPL is viewed as a mechanism for connecting the theoretical and practical aspects of professional knowledge and practice. The literature shows that exposure to WPL contributes to a well-rounded employee who has the ability to apply knowledge and skills in a diverse range of contexts (Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick, & Cragnolini, 2004; Little and Harvey, 2006). It also shows that WPL places professional practice, conceptualized as the doings, relatings and sayings (Kemmis, 2012), at the center of student learning, rather than just theoretical knowledge. Indeed, students who have experienced WPL report an increase in personal development, such as greater levels of self-assurance, self-improvement, and self-awareness (Bullock, Gould, Hejmadi, & Lock, 2009; Cord & Clements, 2010).

Research also shows that gradual and integrated programs are best suited to retaining first year students (Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006). The authors have observed, however, that WPL is most often implemented later in the course; too late perhaps to retain those first year students who discontinued their course because of an initial lack of grounding in "real" practice setting. Little attention has been given to the role workplace learning can play to reduce attrition rates in the first year.

Although, there has been a noted increase in WPL component of universities' curricula in Australia (Pavlova & Maclean, 2013) and the UK (Parry, 2010), WPL's focus has mostly been on the transition from student to graduate. The role WPL can play in the transition to becoming a university student, and its importance in relation to widening the participation of students from under-represented groups in universities, has been overlooked. Early introduction of WPL experiences can help shape professional identification with a chosen career direction, enrich learning experiences and enhance the first year experience. The authors were, therefore, interested in exploring WPL as a strategy that enables students to persist with their university education in the first year.

Widening Participation

To address the need to significantly increase the proportion of the population with a university qualification (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency, 2012), new student demand-driven funding regulations and a lowering of the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) required to enroll in some courses have recently been introduced in Australia. This has allowed for greater student access to universities, especially for under-represented student groups, such as first generation, low socio-economic, regional and/or rural backgrounds (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008).

Since 1994, James, Krause, and Jennings (2010) have conducted a series of national surveys at five-year intervals of first year experience of university students in Australia. Their study highlighted changes in attitudes and experiences for these students. It also compared these attitudes across sub-groups of students, including under-represented groups (for example low socio-economic status, indigenous, regional and rural students). The authors found that over the years, there had been an increase in the lack of clarity about how university education can help students reach their professional goals. They argued that this finding was closely related to the increase in the number of students from under-represented groups enrolling at university.

Thus opening the doors to such a diverse student intake is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it has the potential to increase employment and income capacity for those students from under-represented groups, and ultimately address issues of low civic participation,

cultural engagement and health and life expectancy (DEEWR, 2009). On the other hand, it has the potential to increase the number of students who do not complete their course. It also runs the risk of increasing the number of students disillusioned with university education, thus reinforcing their vision of universities as elitist rather than liberal institutions with an emancipatory mission (Barnett, 2011).

Without relevant strategies in place, universities are likely to see an increase in students' non-completion of their course rather than persistence. Indeed, as James et al. (2010, p. 39) write "student engagement, in its broadest sense, is a predictor of student retention, persistence and the quality of their overall experience in higher education". It is, therefore, paramount for universities to pay close attention to ways of enhancing the first year experience of students, and especially for those from under-represented groups.

A vast amount of research examines ways of enhancing students' learning in the first year to reduce attrition rates (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005; Kift, 2009). Because attrition is the result of several factors, to increase retention rates, universities need to pay attention to: academic demands; choices of field of study; institutional resourcing; managing expectations; location and environment of the institution; students' financial situation and employment obligations; social integration; and the quality of WPL experiences (Yorke & Longden, 2008; Kift, 2009). In addition to that, it is essential for universities to be mindful of "students' perception of the extent to which an institution has supported their learning" (Coates, 2008, p.17).

The range of multifaceted reasons contributing to non-completion include: students' lack of requisite skills to succeed; the lack of support to develop those skills; and poor career advice or choice. One of the solutions offered to address this issue is to provide students with more opportunities to acquire those requisite skills, knowledge and abilities prior to commencing their university studies, such as university preparation or pathway courses.

Little attention has been given to the value of exposing students to experiential and practical learning opportunities in the workplace in reducing attrition rates in the first year. It seemed, therefore, interesting to develop a better understanding the role WPL —outside of classrooms and simulations— can play in the first year as a strategy that enables students to persist with their university education.

In what follows, the study's approach and main findings are presented. Then the challenges associated with students undertaking WPL placement in the first year of university courses are discussed. Also the ways in which WPL can help students commit to a chosen course and develop a sense of professional identity are discussed. An argument is made that there is value in integrating WPL in the first year of graduate level courses, which leads to the conclusion that WPL has potential as a retention strategy for first year students in general, and student from under-represented groups in particular, even in instances of poor learning experiences.

METHOD

The university where the study was conducted is a multi-campus, regional Australian university that offers a range of professional entry courses across four faculties (arts, business, education and science) through on-campus and distance modes. To study the role of WPL in the first year of undergraduate students, information was sought about the experiences and perceptions of students. A qualitative approach was most appropriate to

study the subjective nature of participants' opinions, personal accounts, beliefs or attitudes of WPL (Creswell, 1998). The study was designed around four phases: identification of WPL subjects in the first year, recruitment of students, data collection and data analysis.

Identification of Subjects and Recruitment Strategy

In order to recruit participants to the study a first phase of identifying first year subjects that included compulsory WPL components was required. A range of strategies were devised for this. The university's definition of WPL, referred to above, was used to identify those subjects. The authors found that although the university has embraced WPL in its repertoire of learning and teaching strategies, most courses offer WPL in the final years of study. A search of the university's course handbook showed that out of the 81 courses across the faculties of arts, business, education and science that had WPL components, 26 individual subjects (across 38 courses) offered WPL in the first year.

Once ethics approval was obtained, the authors worked closely with subject, course and WPL coordinators from relevant courses across the university. They helped us recruit students to complete the questionnaire by disseminating information about the project online —via email and electronic notice boards— and during face-to-face classes. Through the questionnaire, students were invited to take part in follow-up in-depth interview.

Data Collection Instruments and Analysis

Initially, the study was designed to collect data pertaining to students' perceptions and opinions about WPL using a series of interviews and workplace observations. Due to the lack of response to invitations to participate in interviews, an alternative data collection strategy was designed using a questionnaire and interviews. In this context, the purpose of using a questionnaire was not as a quantitative method, but rather as a way of reaching more students across several campuses or studying by distance mode to start a conversation through open-ended questions as well as a way of seeking volunteers to take part in an interview.

The questionnaire was administered through a free online survey tool. It consisted of a total of 43 items designed to collect data about participants': 1) demographics – including their personal and family's work experience, and educational background–; 2) course choice and level of commitment; 3) the use of the university's support facilities; and 4) WPL experiences. The questionnaire included a mix of closed and open-ended questions, soliciting five-point Likert scale (e.g., "How committed are you to this course?"), multiple choice (e.g., "Do you have prior work experience?") and free-text answers (e.g., "How did you appraise your work experience placement?"). Questionnaire data was collated and analyzed using spreadsheets. Responses to open-ended questions were clustered for meaning around emerging themes.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants to follow-up on their answers to the questionnaire. The purpose of the interviews was to collect richer narratives about participants' responses in the questionnaire with the aim of deeper understanding their experiences and opinions about WPL. Due to geographical distances the interviews were conducted over the phone. The interviews lasted between 45 and 70 minutes. These were recorded and transcribed. Questions fell under three categories: 1) confirming questionnaire answers with closed-ended questions, for example "Has your answer to survey question 8 changed?"–; 2) expanding and clarifying questionnaire answers with questions like "Can you tell me a bit more about your answer about how you appraised your work experience

placement?"; and 3) diverging from the questionnaires, with additional questions such as "What might an ideal WPL placement be like?" and "How would you approach your next placement?". Interview transcripts were reviewed and compared for themes emerging from each interview as well as across interviews. Interview data were also compared with questionnaire data for similarities and divergences.

Nine months after the interview, participants were asked via email a final question about their enrolment status. To ascertain the potential relationship between WPL and retention rates, participants were asked whether they had enrolled in the second year of their course, stayed enrolled at university (in another course or re-enrolled in the same year) or left university.

Study Limitations

Due to a small data set of 50 respondents, this study does not allow for the generalization of its findings to the whole first year cohorts. Though generalization was not expected in this case, findings are dependable enough to suggest hypotheses to be tested in future research on the potential of WPL as transition pedagogy into university.

The limited level of exposure to WPL in the first year of study and the number of courses or subject coordinators willing to assist recruit students for this study reduced our target population to 622 students. To avoid the risk of further reducing our pool of potential participants, it was decided not to exclusively target students from under-represented groups and at risk of non-completion. The invitation to complete the questionnaire was, therefore, disseminated to all first year students exposed to WPL. Questions about students' demographics were, however, used to identify students belonging to under-represented groups, including first generation, low socio-economic, regional and/or rural backgrounds.

It is worth noting here that this study did not seek to gather data from a significantly large or representative sample of the population of the university's cohort of first year students. It sought to pilot data collection tools and strategies, gather insights and draw out themes to inform the development of a future research agenda about the role of WPL in first year students from under-represented groups. Also, by cross-referencing the study's finding with findings from the body of literature in the field does enable us to provide a snapshot about students' experiences of taking part in WPL in the first year of university studies.

FINDINGS

The study attracted 50 students out of 622 potential first year students from the faculties of Business and Science, which represents a response rate of 8%. The online questionnaire was completed by 50 students, of which 10 also volunteered to take part in an interview. Respondents were enrolled in on-campus and distance mode, 44% of respondents were enrolled in a business or accounting course, 36% in a veterinary science course and 20% were enrolled in a nursing course. The main findings from this study are presented in the following three sections: participants' profiles and course choice, the range of WPL experiences participants', and reasons for attrition and retention.

Participant Profiles and Course Choices

Overall, questionnaire respondents included an even combination of high school leavers transitioning into university, and people in employment seeking professional development

and promotion. And according to James et al., most students were from low socio-economic backgrounds – first generation university student or from regional or remote areas.

More specifically, over three quarters of respondents were female (77%). The highest proportion (60%) of respondents was between the ages of 18-24. The second largest group of students was from the 30-39 age group (17%). The remaining students belonged to the 25-29 age group (12%) and 40-59 (11%). No students were less than 18 or 60 and over.

For over a quarter (27%) of respondents, they were the first person in their family to have enrolled at university. Out of the 73% who had other members of their family study at university, the highest, and most common, qualification obtained was a bachelor degree (38%), followed by a certificate or diploma (21%). There seemed to be very little correlation between studies undertaken by family members and respondents' course choice.

For 88% of respondents the course, they were currently enrolled in was their first choice. These students chose their course out of an interest in the profession (62%), for practical reasons (24%), because of career prospects (7%) or for professional development reasons (7%). The largest numbers of respondents (67%) were very committed to their course, 29% committed, 2% neutral and 2% not committed. None were unsure of their commitment.

Over three quarters of respondents had no prior university experience before their current studies, having come straight from high school (48%) or having studied at a further education college, such as TAFE, (33%). Interestingly, only half of the remaining respondents (19%) who had some prior university experience had not completed their initial studies.

Though students surveyed were undertaking their first WPL placement as undergraduates, a significant percentage (86%) of respondents had prior work experience. Two third (66%) of respondent had been working for more than three years. However, for 70%, their prior work experience did not relate to their current studies.

The Range of WPL Experiences

For all but one respondent (97.22%) the WPL placement was a compulsory element of their course. For more than half (58%) of respondents the placement was organized by the university (course, subject or placement coordinator), for 36% of these organized their placements themselves and 6% organized their placement jointly with the university. The ways in which respondents prepared for their WPL placement ranged from mental to logistical preparation. More specifically, 41% prepared by conducting some prior research, including reading up on the topic, researching the organization they were being placed in and /or contacting their workplace supervisor; 20% prepared by organizing logistically (accommodation, finance, etc.); 12% prepared their placement by negotiating with their current employer; 9% did no preparation besides filling in the form; 6% prepared by talking to or observing peers; 3% by arranging the placement themselves; and 9% other.

The majority of participant in this study were engaged in one of two broad types of placements: 1) a short period of observation or basic tasks in a new work environment; or 2) a longer period of work undertaking a new tasks or an independent project within a student's existing workplace. More specifically, the range of activities undertaken during their placement varied between 31% shadowing practitioners to 50% carrying out basic functions and 17% working on independent projects. For example, one participant enrolled in a Business course undertook a two-week placement in a large international company in

the butcher sector where he designed and implemented a survey to find out about customers' preference for a particular product. Another participant enrolled in a Veterinary Science course undertook two two-day placements in different clinics. In both clinics, the student was asked to observe a range of practices, such as spaying, x-raying and clinical assessment.

Data from the interviews suggest that the range of activities students undertook on placements were strongly dependent on the experience organizations had in hosting students. The following statement by an interview participant is a case in point: "I had never worked for them before. They hadn't had a business placement student, so I guess it was us finding out […] how to best go about the whole thing".

Placements were appraised from different perspectives and using different approaches. The overall experience as well as the types of activities –and their outcomes– were appraised by: completing reflective journals (42%); through a combination of group discussion and report writing (39%); through informal discussions with friends, family and/or WPL supervisor (3%); by other forms of assessment (11%, for example ePortfolios and evaluations).

Satisfaction with Placements

A majority (69%) of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with their overall WPL experience. Interestingly, a significant percentage of those who were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their experience would still recommend WPL to any prospective students. As the following quote illustrates, respondents would recommend WPL, because "WPL is a vital part of this course and […] it should always be available to first years, it really is beneficial whether the experience [is] negative or positive. It all lends to our experiences". This student's response highlights the fact that experiences, even those of poor learning quality, where valued because they provided exposure to the real world of work.

For those respondents, who found the WPL component of their course a rewarding experience, 39% enjoyed putting knowledge into practice, 20% appreciated being part of a community of practice, contributing to a project or having their work acknowledged, 19% found developing a better understanding of their profession the most rewarding aspect, and 14% simply appreciated the learning experience the most. This was evidence by a respondent who wrote that her placement was rewarding because it was about "getting some 'real world' experience and applying some of the knowledge learnt in the lecture theatres to practice".

Over two thirds (67%) of respondents felt their WPL placement had positively influenced their impression of university education. As an interview participant clearly stated, "I really think, number one [WPL's] reinforcing learning […] some of the stuff we done learning in class, you look at from a different perspective".

A significant majority of respondents (78%) stated that the WPL placement helped them better understand their profession. This was the case on three levels: 1) clarifying career options, as exemplified by the following quote by a respondent who wrote that WPL had "introduced me to a new career path"; 2) providing an overview of the breadth of specialization, as evidenced by a respondent who stated that WPL was "extremely beneficial" because it gave them "exposure to a wide variety of clinics in different areas"; and 3) demystifying the profession, which was best illustrated by the following quote: "[WPL] makes you realize what is true in the workforce".

Dropping out or Staying on

Findings about respondents' retention rate were inconclusive, as only 60% of interview participants replied to the final question about re-enrollment. However, all of those (60%) who responded stated having stayed enrolled in the course. The option of dropping out of their course had been considered by 29% of respondents. An additional 55% of respondents could conceive of reasons for dropping out. Reasons for dropping out fell under six categories: family or lifestyle-related issues (31%); heavy course load (24%); pedagogical reasons (17%) —such as failing subjects or difficult subjects—; unmet course expectations (14%); financial reasons (5%); and to take a better offer a better offer (2%).

It is interesting to note that only 5% of respondents mentioned finances as an issue, as 67% of respondent stated that they had spent their own money to undertake their placement. This might suggest that financial reasons only are a reason for dropping as an added factor.

Reasons given for persisting with the course fell under three broad categories: professional, educational, and other reasons. More specifically, reasons included: 26% because respondents were committed to their chosen profession; 26% because they were committed to completing their degree; 18% because of the learning experience; 18% because of a personal challenge; 7% because of academic or social support; and 5% because of the financial outcomes.

Despite 31% of students facing an ethical or professional challenging situation, they did not see this as a reason for withdrawing from their studies. These students stated that when left to deal with the issues on their own, this often led to a certain level of disappointment with their profession and their course, as evidenced by the following quote: "There are many negative aspects encountered during clinical placement for students. Older nurses who have worked within the profession for 50 years hand out a lot of slack for studying at uni, unlike them training in hospitals. […] in some cases you wonder why you are doing this course". Yet, when given the opportunity to seek advice and reflect on the issues, it increased the connection between their courses and their future professional goals. The following statement typifies this point: "I think it was a really good insight to understand, just like every other workplace, there's people that may not get along, confrontation and there's maybe sexist sides to certain people you've got to get over, as a female vet". The statement also highlights the risk WPL placements might have in reinforcing rather than questioning the status quo. Beyond creating a connection between course and professional goals, some students saw these challenges as essential to their learning. This point is illuminated by this statement of an interviewee: "I guess my ideal [WPL] situation is one that's going to challenge me to do a few things that maybe I'm not quite comfortable with".

DISCUSSION

As our findings suggest, taking part in WPL can have a positive impact on first year students and their retention rates. Students might stay on or drop out for a range of reasons. Some of these reasons are social, financial, or pedagogical. Students' commitment to their chosen profession and career path as well as their commitment to the learning experience, personal development, combined with academic or social support is what helps them persist with their studies. What makes them unable to stay is a combination of personal (related to family or financial factors) and course related issues (such as heavy workload, mismatch of expectations). Other reasons, less frequently mentioned in discourses about student

retention, include the fact that students often do not complete their courses because they have found other ways of entering the workforce, have changed their pathway to finding employment or choose to defer their enrolment to a later stage. These reasons are compounded depending on students' stages in their lives and the age group they belong to (Long, Ferrier, & Heagney, 2006).

In this section, the ways in which WPL can help undergraduate students stay engaged with their university course are examined. More specifically, it is argued that WPL can help students stay on for two reasons: because it helps students transition into university; and because it helps them clarify professional expectations.

WPL as Transition Pedagogy

WPL can be seen as a powerful transition pedagogy especially for under-represented first year student groups because of its focus on practical, embodied and relational aspects. First year students who struggle with academic literacy and theoretical abstract constructs find relieve in learning in workplaces and seeing knowledge and theory applied in real world contexts. WPL unlike academic learning is applied and practical and may provide a transition between academic and professional learning (Higgs, 2012). Widening the learning repertoire to include practical and applied approaches can address key elements to keep students committed and enrolled in university courses.

According to Devlin and O'Shea (2011) four elements strengthen students from under-represented groups' commitment to a course. These four elements are: students' own behavior and/or attitude; teacher characteristics; institutional support; and connections with other students. Integrated WPL components in the first year of university curricula can help address Devlin and O'Shea's first element; it can strengthen students' own behavior and/or attitude towards learning. By grounding learning in 'reality', WPL helps students make sense of a new way of learning as well as new content. It helps students put theory into practice and theorize from practice.

It should, however, be noted that to ensure student engagement and committed to their courses, WPL needs to be integrated in the curriculum rather than used as an add-on. Indeed, as Devlin and O'Shea (2011, p. 533) write: "approaches to guiding students appropriately must be within the curriculum in order to ensure that all students are potentially engaged". The inclusion of WPL across university curricula is a challenge, because it needs to be seen not as narrow vocational training, but as university education that prepares students for work and citizenship. These challenges are further compounded when students are exposed to WPL experiences without appropriate support and preparation. Poor preparation for WPL can reinforce the social gap between students from 'traditional' and under-represented groups (Clegg, 2011; Klein & Weiss 2011).

WPL to Strengthen Professional Identification

As findings from this study show, being exposed to a range of professional practices in the first year can help students clarify their professional aspirations and intentions. Further, given the opportunity to reflect, encountering professional and ethical issues during placements is likely to strengthen students' identification with the kind of professional they wish to become. Moreover, the connection between course and future professional goals is important in helping students cope with heavy workloads and, as it could be extrapolated, stay on (Mikkonen, Ruohoniemi, & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2013).

The WPL literature provides some evidence and convincing arguments that a scaffolded approach to integrating WPL throughout university courses can strengthen students' professional practice and professional identity development (Campbell & Zegwaard, 2011; Higgs, 2011; Trede & McEwen, 2012; Zegwaard & Coll, 2011). This is the case when WPL is conceived as a space within a curriculum where professional identity is tested, challenged and shaped. Students in this study were able to clarify their professional goals because WPL placements provided a fundamental aspect of professional socialization. As an authentic setting, WPL prepares students for practice and learning professional roles, understanding workplace cultures, and professionalizing and socializing into a community of practice According to our findings, commencing early with the socialization into a profession appears to strengthen not only the commitment to that profession but also to the course.

Though it is often assumed that WPL in the first year might carry greater risks for students, host workplaces and universities because first year students do not have as many profession-specific skills than senior students and because as newcomers these students are seen as vulnerable to exploitation as an extra pair of hands in the workplace (Robinson, Andrews-Hall, & Fassett, 2007), the study does suggest that these risks are mitigated by students starting out with observation and basic tasks, being closely supervised and being able to reflect on practices.

CONCLUSION

WPL can be used as a strategy to align students' and academics' expectations in terms of the kind of learning —processes and outcomes—students are prepared to engage with, as well as the kind of profession or occupation that best meets their aspirations and abilities. Within universities, the focus of WPL has predominantly been on employability and graduate outcomes. Little attention has been placed on how WPL in the first year can play a role in keeping students committed to a course, developing professional identification, and wanting to belong to a professional group. Focusing on the transition from student to graduate, neglects the role WPL can play in the transition to becoming a university student, and its importance in relation to social equity and widening the participation of students from under-represented groups at university.

As Orrell (2011) argues, WPL has potential as a means for students from under-represented groups to transition to becoming university students as well as to help universities address equity issues. Though there is a need to further our understanding of how to effectively make use of WPL in the transition to university, it can be argued that WPL in the first year offers students from under-represented groups alternative ways of learning from the more traditional academic approaches.

Findings from this study showed that few university courses offered WPL in the first year. From this, it can be concluded that WPL is most often used as final preparation for work rather than as a valuable addition to learning approaches. This further highlights that the value of WPL as a motivator to persist with learning is not well recognized by academics and WPL coordinators or perhaps overshadowed by concerns with safety for and readiness of students while participating in WPL. Although issues around risk management are crucial, our study also shows that there is value in including WPL components in university curricula as early as the first year. Risk, including poor WPL experiences, cannot be altogether prevented and therefore good preparation for WPL experiences is vital. To this end, academics need to have a holistic approach to course development, but also provide

formal opportunities to prepare before, monitor during and debrief at the end of placements all students participating in WPL.

Though this study only provides tentative evidence of WPL as a retention strategy for first year students in general, and students from under-represented groups in particular, this line of questioning is worth pursuing. There is a need to focus on first year WPL models that cater to students' diversity, and their wide range of learning needs and career goals. Furthermore a longitudinal study with a larger sample size is needed to better understand the value and complexity of WPL as transition pedagogy as well as the role it plays in the undergraduate experience in terms of developing a professional identity and lifelong learning attributes.

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The Journal's main aim is to allow specialists working in these areas to disseminate their findings and share their knowledge for the benefit of institutions, co-op/WIL practitioners, and researchers. The Journal desires to encourage quality research and explorative critical discussion that will lead to the advancement of effective practices, development of further understanding of co-op/WIL, and promote further research.

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