

# A systematic approach to the evaluation of the student experience in work-integrated learning

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The importance of work-integrated learning (WIL) experiences in the development of work ready graduates is well known. Despite the centrality of WIL to graduate employability, the vast majority of studies relating to student feedback tend to focus on the evaluation of learning and teaching in the classroom context. This article reports on the development and implementation of a university wide systematic approach to the collection of student feedback on learning in the workplace. It is anticipated that the approach and development of the summative survey tool described in this article will enhance the capacity of the tertiary sector to routinely capture student feedback on the experience of learning in the workplace and assist the development of models of best practice in work-integrated learning. We argue that ensuring quality in the student experience of work-integrated learning is core University business.

Keywords: Work-integrated learning, professional experience, student feedback, evaluation, survey

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Work-integrated learning (WIL) is an umbrella term for a range of approaches and strategies that integrate the “theory of the learning with the practice of work” (Atkinson, 2016, p. 4). WIL has long been considered necessary for work-readiness in professional education and is increasingly positioned as one of the key opportunities for improving the work-readiness of all graduates, even in areas that have not traditionally been linked to clear employment outcomes (McLennan & Keating, 2008). However, despite a growing body of literature reporting the importance of WIL experiences in the curricula of educational programs for the development of graduate employability capabilities (Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick, & Cragnolini, 2004; Freudenberg, Brimble, & Cameron, 2008; Jackson, 2015; Peach, Ruinard & Webb, 2014; Reynolds, Howley, Southgate, & Brown, 2016; Trede, 2012), there are “few empirical studies or reviews that inform evaluation methodology for them” (Von Treuer, Sturre, Keele, & McLeod, 2011, p. 197).

WIL at university takes many forms ranging from ad hoc arrangements to full integration within undergraduate and postgraduate courses or degree programs. Each form of the WIL experience shares characteristics and generally involves training for future employment (Von Treuer et al., 2011). Where WIL experiences are fully integrated into the curriculum, it is invariably accredited and assessed. The responsibility for these processes usually rests with specific academic disciplines and university faculties and departments (Atkinson, 2016). To date, few Australian universities have adopted a centralised and systematic approach to evaluating the student experience of work-integrated learning. The new national standards for higher education in Australia provide the impetus for change in this area (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2015).

The Higher Education Standards (HES) Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015, developed by the Australian Government’s Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TESQA), has long

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regulated that students must have opportunities to provide feedback on their educational experiences and that student feedback should inform institutional monitoring, review and improvement activities (TESQA, 2015). A recent TEQSA amendment to the Higher Education Standards Framework (Sections 5.1 and 5.3) stipulates that the educational provider's course approval and monitoring processes must also consider work-integrated learning experiences (TESQA, 2015). Similar requirements or recommendations have been made by the TEQSA equivalent bodies in other parts of the world. For example, a guide developed under the auspices of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Scotland states "WBL [Work Based Learning] programmes should be evaluated in a participatory manner involving all stakeholders" (Ball & Manwaring, 2010). It is now an imperative that universities provide students with an effective means of providing feedback on all of their learning experiences, regardless of the location in which learning takes place. This article reports on one institution's recent development and implementation of a centrally administered survey instrument specifically designed to capture student feedback on their experience of learning in the workplace. The findings of this initiative are expected to be beneficial to higher education providers in Australia and elsewhere.

## EVALUATING THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Student feedback can be an influential tool in the ongoing quality assurance processes of higher education institutions (Alderman, Towers, & Bannah, 2012; Cathcart, Greer, & Neale, 2014; Hammonds, Mariano, Ammons, & Chambers, 2017; Harvey, Nair, & Mertova, 2011; Palmer, 2012; Shah, Cheng, & Fitzgerald, 2017). Most summative student evaluation survey tools used by Australian universities focus on the subject and/or the teaching in that subject with little attention paid to the context and location of the learning (Young, McConkey, & Kirby, 2011; Watson, 2003). It is perhaps for this very reason that some scholars have argued that evaluation tools tend to be too broad and consequently provide little insight into learning and teaching practice (Abrami, d'Appolonia, & Rosenfield, 2007; Davies, Hirschberg, Lye, Johnston, & McDonald, 2007). Limitations notwithstanding, it is generally accepted that surveys of the student experience provide valuable insights relating to learning and teaching practices and are, therefore, important for several purposes (Alderman et al., 2012; Harvey et al., 2011; Huybers, 2017; Nair, Adams, & Mertova, 2008; Palmer, 2012).

The evaluation of the student learning experience on work placement is however "typically more complex than evaluation of a standard university unit" (von Treuer et al., 2011, p. 196). Workplace learning situations are quite different from classroom based learning: the university often has little control over the learning environment; learning situations are often variable; and they may be brief and not replicable (Eraut, Alderton, Cole, & Senker, 2000; Hodges, 2011). Various attempts to ensure the quality of workplace based learning for medical and nursing students have been reported in the international literature. Booth, Collins and Hammond (2009) describe a pilot at the Hull and York Medical School in which evaluation was embedded into the professional practice curriculum. They argue that by doing so, staff and students were encouraged to recognise evaluation as integral, rather than peripheral, both to quality processes and skill development for the professional in training. Similarly, Ganzel (2004) discusses attempts to involve undergraduate medical students at the University of Louisville in evaluation by engaging with student leaders, with the aim of enhancing the learning experience. In the Australian context, Penman and Oliver (2004) report the development of a survey instrument at the University of South Australia to capture the experience of nursing students on placement.

While adding to discipline specific literature on student evaluation of the quality and experience of workplace based learning, none of these studies address the use of student feedback relating to WIL at

an institutional level. This may reflect a broader lack of published research into effective and systematic means of collecting student feedback on WIL in higher education. This article attempts to address this gap. It is hoped that the evaluation approach described in this paper, including the development and implementation of a summative survey tool, will enhance the capacity of the tertiary sector to routinely capture student feedback on their experience of learning in the workplace as well as contribute to the international body of literature examining the student experience in work-integrated learning (Higgs, 2014; Peach et al., 2014; Winter, 1994).

#### A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TO CAPTURING THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE OF WIL

This paper focuses on a new survey instrument recently implemented in a large publically funded Australian university (See Appendix). The collation and distribution of student feedback on subjects (which are entities comprising a degree program, and may be referred to as units or courses), and individual teaching performance related to learning in those subjects, is provided by the central organisational unit also responsible for the broader provision of learning and teaching services, including academic development and e-learning. Online surveys using standard questionnaires are the main data collection process for subject and teaching evaluation at the university.

Prior to 2016, subjects containing WIL experiences had been: (a) included in the standard survey of subjects/teaching or (b) excluded from any of the surveys conducted by the central unit. While the standard survey items allowing students to provide feedback on assessment and resources can be deemed broadly relevant to the workplace based placement experience, the standard survey tool does not address specific aspects of learning in the workplace. In particular, it does not capture some of the common experiences of WIL for students in some disciplines, such as working across different physical locations, undertaking shift work, and having multiple supervisors. Moreover, the instruction and feedback a student receives in the work context often differs considerably in timing, delivery and mode to that a student receives when undertaking classroom based subjects.

At this institution, surveys of the student experience of WIL have more commonly been administered at the local discipline and subject level by the academic staff or faculty member responsible for the delivery of the subject in which workplace based placement is an element. Despite efforts made by many staff, there has been no uniform or consistent survey tool or systematic approach to assessing the student learning experience in the workplace context within or across subjects, disciplines, schools, faculties and campuses. Moreover, these types of ad-hoc surveying posed a risk to students whose anonymity could not be assured, due to the involvement of those responsible for the delivery of WIL.

The central Learning and Teaching Unit and the relevant faculties identified the need for a university wide survey tool to capture the specific learning experience of students engaged in WIL. It was further hypothesised that the administration of the survey through the central unit responsible for the delivery of other core evaluation surveys would ensure a degree of consistency in both the content and timing of the surveys. This would also allow for the generation of uniform reporting, including a reliable analysis of the statistical data based on the student feedback.

#### DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING THE PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE SURVEY TOOL

Collaboration between the Learning and Teaching Unit and the two largest faculties in the university was integral to the development of a discrete tool suitable for capturing student feedback on the experience of learning in the workplace. These faculties are primarily dedicated to the education of teachers and health professionals, and work-integrated learning is a core component for many

disciplines. In 2016, the Faculty of Health Sciences accounted for 46% of enrolments (14,880 students), while the Faculty of Arts and Education accounted for 36% of enrolments (12,229 students). Professional experience is the term most commonly used to describe WIL in the fields of health and education and in order to ensure clarity for staff and students, the term 'professional experience' was used in all consultations related to the development of the new survey instrument. Both faculties and the Learning and Teaching Unit worked collaboratively and, for illustrative purposes, the processes for development and implementation of the new professional experience survey (ProfEx) with the larger and more complex health sciences faculty are now described.

The Faculty of Health Sciences offers programs at six of the University's seven campuses, and consists of six schools and 13 disciplines including nursing, paramedicine, exercise physiology, physiotherapy, social work and speech pathology. Core ProfEx survey items were developed after consultations with key staff responsible for professional practice in 12 of the 13 disciplines. The development of the survey tool was facilitated by an advisory group of six academic staff from representative disciplines; the Faculty academic coordinator for professional practice; and staff from the Learning and Teaching Unit. The discipline representatives reached agreement that required feedback on the student experience through WIL fell into the following categories:

- factors enhancing the learning experience on placement (support and resources before, during and after);
- opportunities to integrate theory and practice and increase professional confidence and competence; and
- key professional learnings, challenges and suggestions for improvement.

In keeping with the university commitment to avoiding 'survey fatigue' amongst students, the advisory group established that the new survey instrument would include no more than seven core items and collect both quantitative and qualitative data. To maintain consistency in the surveying and reporting of student views, the ProfEx survey adopted the same ordinal level of measurement for the quantitative survey items, i.e., a five-point Likert scale, used in the standard survey of learning and teaching in coursework units. This strategy was adopted to reduce confusion among both students and staff. Students were familiar with completing a survey form with this scale, and staff were familiar with interpreting the reports generated with this measurement scale.

After the initial WIL related survey items were developed a paper-based ProfEx survey was piloted with a small cohort of midwifery students. The survey results were then peer reviewed to ensure validity i.e. that the tool collected the intended data. After a few minor modifications to remove ambiguity in questions, approval was received from the relevant faculty level learning and teaching committee and a national Head of School to trial an online version of the survey with a large cohort of final year allied health students during semester one of 2016. These students were located in two states and their placements were organised with multiple agencies. The students were able to access the new survey via a web link sent to them from the central Learning and Teaching Unit, as well as through the University's learning management system (Moodle). Regular reminder emails were sent to students, and the subject coordinators actively encouraged survey completion. Approximately one third of invitees responded to the online survey pilot. Survey responses were again peer reviewed for clarity and usefulness of data collected. Two changes to the questionnaire were made: both making the object of the statement clearer. For example, question one asked students to rate on a 5 point Likert scale (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree) the degree to which the "university supports and resources" enhanced their learning on placement. The advisory group determined the item to be too broad and

unable to capture the intended data. Subsequently this question was replaced by two items that enabled more specific data collection: University resources to support learning on placement and University academic staff support during placement.

In semester two of 2016, the Faculty Learning and Teaching Standing Committee and all national Heads of Schools supported a large scale trial of the ProfEx survey for all health science subjects where the practicum component comprised 80% or more of the subject. This second trial generated a response rate of approximately 42%. Following this trial the Faculty resolved that student feedback on practicum subjects with a more even mix of classroom and workplace based learning would be assessed using the standard survey of learning and teaching in coursework units with five additional qualitative items from the ProfEx survey to capture WIL feedback. Consequently, all students enrolled in health science subjects with a WIL component, would have the opportunity to provide specific feedback on their experience of learning in the workplace.

Standard University survey data management protocols are followed. After the closure of the relevant survey period, the central unit generates a range of reports and undertakes checks to ensure the accuracy of the data. Reports are generated at the university, faculty, school and subject levels: access to these reports is granted in accordance with the University's policy and procedures relating to evaluations. The evaluation system is configured to enable access to reports through email communication to relevant staff. Each report contains a summary of student responses to quantitative items, including the number and percentage of responses to the options in the measurement scale, the central tendencies, and graphical representations. All student responses to each qualitative item are collated and reported anonymously. University policy and procedures require each faculty's Executive Dean, Associate Dean Learning and Teaching and Heads of Schools to ensure that appropriate follow up actions are taken in relation to the student feedback collected in standardised surveys.

#### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

WIL can provide students with the opportunity to reinforce the professional learning acquired in traditional university learning contexts while simultaneously developing generic workplace skills (Crebert et al., 2004; Jackson, 2015; Peach et al., 2014; Reynolds, et al., 2016; Trede, 2012). Hence, students frequently report that workplace based learning environments are critical to their development as effective practitioners in their chosen fields (Watt & Pascoe, 2013). In the absence of systematic data collection, analysis and reporting processes, it may be difficult for universities to identify trends in the student experience of WIL over time, and within and across disciplines and Faculties. This poses a threat to quality assurance as well as to the relationships with WIL providers (Ferns, Russell, & Kay, 2016). However, the implementation of a systematic data collection process for WIL is not without challenges.

Achieving adequate response rates to student surveys is critical to collecting evaluation data that is reliable and meaningful. In Australia, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TESQA) *Risk Assessment Framework* (2014) specifies that institutional surveys must receive response rates of 35% or more, in order for the data to be considered as reliable evidence of learning and teaching quality. While the overall response rates in the two pilots of the ProfEx surveys were adequate, specific campuses or schools did not reach the required minimum level. This suggests that more needs to be done to assist staff in schools and faculties in understanding the importance of discussing and promoting the ProfEx surveys to students.

A range of promotional strategies have been implemented at this institution for engaging student participation in the standard surveys. Since the ProfEx survey is administered through the same central unit, the strategies for encouraging student participation can be adopted or adapted for the ProfEx surveys. The ProfEx online survey system allows for automated and manual reminder messages to be emailed to students who have not completed the survey. Furthermore, the online survey system allows for the generation and dissemination of live response rates during the survey period; this helps to monitor response rates and acts as an alert to take necessary action, such as, additional reminders through the learning management system. Given that students on placement are off campus, and that placements occur at different times across and within disciplines, the usual modes of communication via the Learning Management System can be less effective. Hence the importance of schools working with the central Learning and Teaching Unit to remind students to complete the surveys and emphasise the importance of their feedback.

Higher education institutions have progressively increased the number of surveys administered to students, prompting counter-productive consequences, as particularly evidenced by declining survey response rates which may be the result of survey fatigue among students (Adams & Umbach, 2011; Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009; Porter, Whitcomb, & Weitzer, 2004). In developing a new survey, it was important to deliberately avoid the possibility of causing survey fatigue and ensure that subjects with a placement component would not be surveyed twice, with both the standard subject survey and the ProfEx survey (Adams & Umbach, 2011). This strategy was deemed unsatisfactory by academic staff teaching the coursework component of a practicum subject. In response to staff concerns and in order to systematically collect feedback on subject content, teacher performance and the experience of work-integrated learning, specific WIL related items have now been added to the standard survey tool. Faculty areas are now required to select the survey tool that best suits the context of the subject, given that some subjects have both coursework and placement components. It is however imperative that faculties identify the most appropriate dates for starting and ending the ProfEx surveys so that as many students as possible are able to provide their feedback after completing the WIL component. As WIL experiences frequently extend beyond regular study periods (semesters, trimesters, terms, etc.), some flexibility in setting survey dates is necessary. Without such critical information being made available to those who are responsible for managing the survey process, some students may be inadvertently disadvantaged (i.e., having not started or completed their placement at the time when the surveys are conducted). It is important to recognise however that the survey period may not always be extended sufficiently to capture the experience of students whose placements are significantly delayed.

All evaluation methods, whether they use survey tools or other means to collect data, have limitations. Some limitations may be overcome with refinement or continuous improvement. For example, the large scale pilot of the ProfEx survey tool indicated a need to adjust some of the survey items to enable more specific student feedback. Minor changes were made to the tool so that Faculty stakeholders could readily distinguish between University-related and workplace-related factors impacting the student experience of WIL. It should be noted that if the content of a questionnaire is changed significantly, it also means that the ability to compare student feedback from one year to the next is significantly compromised. Furthermore, the implementation of changes (even those considered as minor) may require significant time and other resources from the survey administration perspective.

The lack of a workplace identifier was found to be a major limitation in the ProfEx survey. The tool identified the subject (with placement component) in which the student was enrolled, but not the specific location of the placement. Early feedback from some academics indicated a strong preference for knowing the location of the placement; this knowledge would, they argued, enable them to address

any workplace issues raised in the student evaluation of WIL. However, the inclusion of organizational information has the potential for students to be identifiable and their feedback will no longer be anonymous. After some discussion, it was proposed that the placement location could be incorporated into the reporting and that the decision to disclose location would be at the discretion of the student. In adherence to University policy and procedures related to learning and teaching evaluation, it was suggested that work locations would only be identified in the ProfEx survey reports when a specific number of students responding to the survey were attending the same place of work. This would ensure a degree of anonymity in reporting and the feedback students provide would remain confidential. Given that an external vendor maintains the register relating to placement identification a significant investment of the University resources may be required for the dynamic (real time) transfer of information from the vendor's database to the University's internal evaluation system. Further, this potential solution does not address the concerns raised by academics in disciplines where very small numbers of students, sometimes only one student, attends an agency.

## CONCLUSION

The key role that WIL plays in transitioning graduates from educational institutions into the workforce underscores the need to effectively evaluate the experience of students undertaking workplace based learning (Jackson, 2015). The university wide professional experience survey described in this paper is one tool that educational providers can use to routinely and systematically monitor the quality of WIL activities and experiences. The ProfEx reports that are generated using the university wide evaluation system provide consistent data and statistical analyses that enable the comparison of survey results over time at various organisational levels. This systematic process facilitates informed and evidence-based decision making by faculties and schools, as well as at the subject level. For example, at the macro level, the data is needed for the allocation of resources, whilst at the micro level it can assist in understanding the issues individual students are experiencing in the WIL environment and in the planning to resolve these issues in future placements.

Accurately capturing the student experience of WIL is complex and challenging (Higgs, 2014; Peach et al., 2014). This complexity can be partly understood as a function of: the number of stakeholders in the WIL experience (students, university and industry based educators); and the very nature of learning that occurs in the workplace which can be informal and incidental. The process of gaining student feedback can be further complicated and challenged by the timing of evaluation data collection, difficulties achieving adequate response rates, the need to protect the privacy of external workplace-based educators, and anonymity of students. Measures to address these include the systematic development of a suite of evaluation tools including those capable of providing immediate feedback on the student experience. In adopting a systematic approach to collecting student feedback we argue that ensuring quality in work-integrated learning is everybody's business.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to acknowledge the valuable contribution of University colleagues, particularly Mr Jeffrey Jones.

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## APPENDIX: Professional Experience Survey – Faculty of Health Sciences

**Please select the response that best reflects your experiences in the placement.**

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

1: My experience of learning on placement was enhanced by:

- 1.1 Knowledge and skills gained in my course
- 1.2 Pre-placement preparation provided by University academic staff
- 1.3 On-site placement induction
- 1.4 On-site placement supervision
- 1.5 Constructive feedback received on my performance
- 1.6 University resources to support learning on placement
- 1.7 University academic staff support during placement

2: My placement provided me with opportunities to:

- 2.1 Integrate my theoretical knowledge in a work based setting
- 2.2 Increase confidence in my professional knowledge and skills
- 2.3 Increase my competence in applying professional knowledge and skills

**In the comments sections please write ethical and constructive feedback in a professional manner.**

3: What were the main things you learnt from this placement?

4: What aspects of this placement were particularly beneficial to your learning experience?

5: What were the main challenges of your placement experience?

6: In what ways has this placement contributed to your development as a professional?

7: Please suggest ways your placement experience could be improved.



## About the Journal

The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning (IJWIL) publishes double-blind peer-reviewed original research and topical issues dealing with Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). IJWIL first published in 2000 under the name of Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education (APJCE). Since then the readership and authorship has become more international and terminology usage in the literature has favoured the broader term of WIL. In response to these changes, the journal name was changed to the International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning in 2018.

In this Journal, WIL is defined as "*an educational approach that uses relevant work-based experiences to allow students to integrate theory with the meaningful practice of work as an intentional component of the curriculum*". Examples of such practice includes work placements, work-terms, internships, practicum, cooperative education (Co-op), fieldwork, work-related projects/competitions, service learning, entrepreneurship, student-led enterprise, applied projects, simulations (including virtual WIL), etc. WIL shares similar aims and underpinning theories of learning as the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training, however, each of these fields are seen as separate fields.

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

## Types of Manuscripts Sought by the Journal

Types of manuscripts sought by IJWIL primarily of two forms; 1) *research publications* describing research into aspects of work-integrated learning and, 2) *topical discussion* articles that review relevant literature and provide critical explorative discussion around a topical issue. The journal will, on occasions, consider best practice submissions.

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

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

*Best practice and program description* papers. On occasions, the Journal also seeks manuscripts describing a practice of WIL as an example of best practice, however, only if it presents a particularly unique or innovative practice or is situated in an unusual context. There must be a clear contribution of new knowledge to the established literature. Manuscripts describing what is essentially 'typical', 'common' or 'known' practices will be encouraged to rewrite the focus of the manuscript to a significant educational issue or will be encouraged to publish their work via another avenue that seeks such content.

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Publisher: New Zealand Association for Cooperative Education