

## Enriching work-integrated learning students' opportunities online during a global pandemic (COVID-19)

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This paper examines how five students within a Bachelor of Sport and Exercise university WIL course developed learning opportunities that resulted in WIL being moved from the workplace to create authentic online initiatives during the COVID-19 restrictions. This exploratory research provides insights into the students' learning outcomes from creating online WIL initiatives that developed and promoted activities for a range of stakeholders involved in sport organizations, schools, and fitness industry businesses. The impact of these initiatives resulted in enhanced participation opportunities and engagement in physical activity for a range of sport teams, school children, and fitness clients. Themes are presented from content analysis of student perceptions of individual's learning outcomes from moving WIL online. The findings indicated that from the students' perspective, their online initiatives enriched capability but required adaptability, flexibility, and resilience. The period of online WIL also enabled the development of transferable skills and graduate attributes.

Keywords: COVID-19, WIL, student capability, graduate attributes

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Universities internationally have continued to strategically increase work-integrated learning (WIL) co-curriculum opportunities for students to enhance graduate attributes and future employability (Oliver & Jorre de St Jorre, 2018). However, in 2020, the global pandemic of the novel corona virus presented a number of challenges and restrictions that limited WIL activity. A series of levels were introduced by the New Zealand Government outlining the restrictions. These were then interpreted for WIL by the Ministry of Education (MoE) and Universities NZ (2020): At alert level 1, WIL is allowed; at level 2 WIL can continue adhering to physical distancing measures; at level 3 WIL is not allowed unless providing an essential service or through online simulated placements; at level 4, WIL is not allowed unless home-based or online.

Sport and recreation activity was significantly limited due to the restrictions enforced by the New Zealand Government, with a need for physical distancing. Further guidelines were put in place by Sport New Zealand (2020), the government agency, for sport and recreation activities at alert levels 1-4 related to non-contact activity, contact activity, waters sports, active recreation, and play. At the end of March, four weeks into Semester 1, when many students were arranging or had just started their WIL placements, New Zealand was placed into level 4 lockdown with only essential services such as hospitals and supermarkets able to open. All individuals were instructed to stay home unless they were essential service workers. Physical activity was only allowed within the local area. There were very strict measures, which meant that many businesses could not operate at all. Many WIL students returned home, as they could no longer physically access their university or place of work. Many students, particularly in the health sector, were withdrawn from their work placements and were unable to continue with their projects until level 2 returned some two months later. Many WIL placements were put on-hold. Placement completion, accreditation compliance and graduation became uncertain.

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The purpose of this paper is to examine how students ( $n=5$ ) of a WIL course within a Bachelor of Sport and Exercise program at Massey University in New Zealand developed opportunities that resulted in WIL being moved from the workplace to create authentic online initiatives throughout the COVID-19 period of levels 4 and 3, before a return to the work-place was allowed under level 2. The Sport and Exercise Practicum (SEP) is designed to provide WIL experiences in all sport and exercise areas according to individual interests and experience. Students may choose to undertake a practicum in areas including, but not limited to, sport event management, sport coaching, sport coordination, sport performance, exercise prescription and athlete conditioning. The aim of this exploratory research was to examine the impact of COVID-19 on the perceptions of students learning outcomes and practice in each of these areas. This article examines students' insights creating online WIL initiatives that developed and promoted activities for a range of stakeholders involved in sport organizations, schools and fitness industry businesses.

#### ENHANCING GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES

Graduate attributes are life-long learning, generic, transferable 'soft' skills, beyond those that are discipline specific (Oliver, 2015). Examples of such transferable skills relate to the 6 Cs of deep learning characterized by Fullan and Scott (2014): self-management (character), enterprise (creativity), leadership responsibilities (collaboration), community of practice (citizenship), effective communication and critical thinking. The WIL experience allows students to enhance their employability and citizenship, and as such students are encouraged to reflect on the development of these boundary spanning capabilities as well as gaining a depth of understanding of workplace systems (Gardner, 2017; Martin & Rees, 2019b). The four most common graduate attributes across the Australian higher education sector have been ranked as communication, global citizenship, discipline specific knowledge and lifelong learning (Hall et al., 2017). Oliver and Jorre de St Jorre's (2018) review of graduate attributes for 2020 and beyond, recommended that universities should emphasize attributes associated with global citizenship, teamwork and communication. They also argued that there should be more emphasis placed on independence, critical thinking and problem-solving, as well as the fundamental foundational skills of written and spoken communication.

WIL experiences in higher education can help students to develop self-efficacy, "perceptions of themselves and their capabilities to deal with change and achieve results" (Freudenberg et al., 2013, p. 177). Such opportunities also enhance one's sense of belonging (affiliation), self-esteem (respect and from others), and self-actualization (personal growth), which are important aspects of Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of human needs. An important aspect of the WIL process is the student's development as a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1991), which helps enrich aspects of self-management and self-efficacy (Gardner 2017; Martin & Rees, 2019b). Self-management skills relate to an individual's perception of themselves in terms of values, abilities, interests and goals (Leong & Kavanagh, 2013).

Jackson and Wilton (2016) concluded that in relation to enhancing employability, WIL opportunities promote career development learning, the ability to self-assess work-related capabilities, and develop insight into the realities of a profession. WIL experiences also provide enhanced confidence and career planning and networking. Lyons and Brown (2003) pointed out that in a rapidly changing leisure field students with generic and specialist skills and WIL experience "are most likely to be well placed to take advantage of change and to make significant contributions to the field as professionals" (p. 65).

This exploratory research study examined students' learning opportunities and outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic period of level 3 and 4, when students managed their WIL experience by moving

to work online, and how the COVID-19 WIL experience has enhanced graduate attributes, self-efficacy and employability characteristics.

## METHOD

The data in this exploratory study was collected from five third-year SEP students' perceptions of their learning outcomes from moving WIL online during the COVID-19 restrictions. While exploratory research may not be generalizable, it presents the opportunity to investigate issues and social phenomena that are relatively new, where the aim is to learn more about the topic (Stebbins, 2001); in this case, students' WIL experiences online. All of the respondents were female, four were aged 20-25 and one was over 30. Activities that the five students (using the following student coding, S1, S2...) completed were varied including "filming videos of activities that children can do at home to coming up with new activities that [the children] can utilize" (S2). One student (S3) "developed an online 'COVID-19 support and resource group for [athletes, creating] a hub where [athletes] internationally can share [activities] and mental health resources... encouraging communication between members to bring together a sense of community". Another student (S4) was involved in "creating interactive social media content... incorporating key life skills into the program so our kids can experience a variety of learning and challenges while keeping fit and active". Other students' activities involved programming, editing and posting online to social media a variety of sport skills and exercise activity videos, "enabling motivation of the wider [sport] community" (S1) or "live-streaming training sessions via Zoom or Facebook" (S5).

Students were asked by questionnaire to reflect specifically on three areas: their main work activity; perceived WIL learning opportunities; and overall experience during the level 3 and 4 period of working online. The returned one-page Word documents were not part of any course assessment, but are used to illustrate sport and exercise practicum opportunities for future students. Although there were 60 of the students who potentially could have responded, many of these students were not able to undertake work during this time due to the restrictions, and hence did not return the questionnaire. The project was approved and deemed to be low risk against the university's research ethics criteria (ethics notification number: 4000022586), and information provided for the content analysis was anonymous.

Coding was undertaken independently by both researchers to develop themes from the data of students' perspectives of their online practice (Spencer et al., 2014). The information was then analyzed according to Huberman's (1994) well-established principles of data reduction, data display, conclusion-drawing, and verification to highlight key themes. All themes presented, were highlighted by each student. It is acknowledged that the small sample size and qualitative approach makes transferability somewhat limited, however given the unique opportunity presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, the data does offer useful insights into the students' learning outcomes from this online experience.

## FINDINGS

Several themes were identified through content analysis of the data from the students' responses. These included enhancing capability and developing graduate attributes of self-management, enterprise, effective communication, networking, and leadership. Each theme will be discussed in turn, and example quotes are provided below using the following student coding (S1, S2 ...)

### *Capability*

The findings highlighted the importance of the work that students completed during this time, which added value for the organization. Many of the initiatives, provided activity that was new and not already available, for example Facebook pages with videos and details of skills and drills related to particular sports. This work added some normality and replaced planned activity that could not happen due to the restrictions around physical activity and sport. As such, it filled a void, as individuals could not go out to places and complete normal practice or compete.

The students became increasingly professional, credible, and trustworthy, so various stakeholders (children, athletes, fitness clients) would look forward to the various posts and activities, as they were engaging, and providing reach beyond the immediate network. Each of the initiatives were targeted and group specific, for example junior sport, after school programs, professional athletes, or fitness clients. The following feedback illustrates development of the student's capability: "[The sport organization] has been incredibly supportive and encouraging of the creation of my '[Sport] at Home' initiative. Most importantly this experience allowed me to build a name for myself in the [sport organization] and wider community" (S1) and "Learning that I am capable to speak up and share my thoughts and opinions on what needs improving" (S2).

Although initially the period of government restrictions caused by COVID-19 was challenging, it also provided unexpected learning benefits and opportunities, which were enjoyable, rewarding and appreciated by the students.

Rewarding – I am grateful for the opportunities of leadership and management that I may have not received in a pre-COVID environment. Eye-opening – I am so aware now of the multifaceted approach when it comes to creating a healthy and successful athlete. The inclusion of mental and emotional support and health is more obvious than ever now in managing and maintaining a high-level athlete (S3).

I ended up really enjoying what I was doing, being able to use new tools and develop skills in areas I wouldn't normally have the opportunity. I am grateful that I was still able to work through the pandemic, as it allowed me to experience different challenges, pressures, obstacles and opportunities (S4).

I have increased my knowledge on topics that I was less confident about, now feeling competent to tackle more challenging [fitness] clients with higher risk stratification. Thoroughly enjoyed being part of the team and have been encouraged to succeed in my learning (S5).

### *Self-Management*

The opportunity enabled the students to work independently and increase their self-confidence, belief, awareness and appreciation of their 'normal' work and personal life. One student (S1) commented that "working independently has been a positive experience and has taught me many lessons about myself and also helped to improve my self-confidence, leadership, and self-management skills" (S1). Another student (S5) indicated that "working independently throughout the lockdown has highlighted how I can continue to work successfully and taught me many lessons about myself. It helped to improve my self-confidence, leadership, and self-management skills." One student (S2) highlighted that "I learnt to find joy in the little things - objects you find around the house could make a cool game for children who

were struggling with lockdown. Lockdown taught me to feel grateful for my 'normal' life, that is, being able to physically go to work and see the children and work colleagues".

However, COVID-19 also provided some challenges in readjusting to the changing work, personal and online environment.

Struggling to handle this completely new and unfamiliar territory in my sport while managing my own uncertainties and anxieties in my personal life. COVID-19 has affected every aspect of my life; so adjusting not only my studies but everything else has been time-consuming, stressful and exhausting (S3).

While working over the lockdown period, it became very challenging initially as it was a totally different working environment for me. I developed a routine that worked for me and had weekly online video meetings with the supervisors' team which helped clarify what my tasks and activities were for the week (S4).

### *Enterprise*

The government restrictions and requirement for social distancing (2 meters) ensured that students needed to be creative, proactive and push their comfort zones in developing appropriate physical activity. These points are illustrated by student (S1) who noted that they "had many opportunities to be creative, take risks, and be put outside of my comfort zone" (S1). One student (S3) indicated that this period was an "opportunity to display ingenuity and proactivity in the development of [new sport] programs; including meeting government restrictions and ensuring safe training". This innovative activity also involved developing initiatives and engagement through social media platforms, particularly Facebook and YouTube. For example: "increasing social media engagement and maintaining a professional presence on sites such as Facebook" (S1), "creating interactive Facebook content, activities and schedules for future holiday programs with various sport related themes" (S4), and "designing and prescribing [exercise programs] appropriately to a range of cohorts via virtual methods" (S5).

### *Networking*

The students created networks and relationships with a number of different community stakeholders. For example, one student (S1) "engaged with a variety of stakeholders in the community on a professional and personal level, and built great relationships with those in the organization, as well as those in the wider community" (S1). Another student (S5) indicated that the online opportunity enhanced their "ability to train various population cohorts and help them along their journey." Staying "connected with the kids through Facebook posts" was also an important outcome for one student (S4), "and keeping in regular contact with my team also kept me motivated. I worked alongside the school and our parents to reassure them that we were taking many precautions to ensure the program was safe and enjoyable" (S4). Developing networks and staying connected was important in developing a sense of belonging and mental well-being, as "doing these activities during lockdown level 3 and 4 allowed me to feel connected to something outside of my bubble and made me feel like I had purpose" (S2). Another student indicated that the online WIL experience provided an "opportunity to think outside the box... I created a hub where [athletes] internationally could share and find free virtual classes and mental health resources... encouraging communication between members to bring together a sense of community" (S3).

### *Communication*

A range of effective communication skills were developed "through written / verbal methods (phone calls, zoom meetings, and emails)" (S1). For example, "sharing my suggestions of how we can make [the organization] a better place for the children and Zoom meetings with everyone who works at the facility" (S2). Another student (S3) indicated it was an "opportunity to communicate with my mentors and supervisors in different ways (virtually vs. face-to-face)." The period of lockdown also enabled more effective communication amongst colleagues. For example one student (S5) noted that "[the team] has been so supportive as I have learnt the ropes during level 3 and 4 of COVID-19 lockdown" (S5), and another student (S4) indicated that "although it was very unsettling, it allowed me to form closer relationships with my team and understand how important it is to develop those key [communication] skills that allow you to adjust in high pressure, rapidly changing environments" (S4).

### *Leadership*

Students were able to take leadership responsibility and ownership for their projects, as they were mainly working independently from home, without direct supervisor input. For example, one student (S5) "learnt so many leadership skills whilst taking charge of the [fitness client liaison] role, collaborating with the team and feeling confident to express ideas" (S5). The WIL experience also provided another student (S3) with the "opportunity to take a bigger role in leadership than I would probably be designated in usual circumstances... and to demonstrate my deep learning in ways which may have not been previously allowed/accepted (S3). Specific examples of students taking responsibility and designing, creating and implementing initiatives included "coming up with 10 new activities that [the program] can utilize in the afternoons" (S2), "developing and putting forward to my supervisor the 2 year business plan goals" (S4) and "designing and creating a [sport] resource suited to the needs of the [sport] community" (S1).

## DISCUSSION

These findings from the period of online WIL have highlighted the students' development as reflective practitioners (Schön, 1991), and of transferable skills and graduate attributes related to Fullan and Scott's (2014) 6 Cs of deep learning: self-management (character), enterprise (creativity), leadership responsibilities (collaboration), community of practice (citizenship), effective communication and critical thinking. This exploratory research supports findings related to attributes of sport and exercise graduates noted in previous studies (e.g., Martin & Rees, 2019a, b). The attainment of these learning outcomes during the period of COVID-19 points to the students' successful transition to online WIL offerings. While it is acknowledged that the small sample size is a limitation of this exploratory study, it is hoped that findings will inform further research focused on gaining insights into students' learning outcomes from similar online WIL experiences.

The current findings indicated that the online WIL initiatives helped bring about a sense of belonging (Maslow, 1954) and purpose for the students, as well as enhancing existing and providing new connections. This outcome was particularly important given the uncertainty of the situation at the start of the pandemic, and the isolating effects during the lockdown period. The flow-on impact to mental health and well-being has led to the students enhancing aspects of Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs including self-esteem (respect and from others), and self-actualization (personal growth). These online initiatives also provided the opportunity to enhance the student's industry credibility and reputation. The students were able to adapt to a rapidly changing sport environment and develop generic and specialist skills through this unique WIL experience, and, as Lyons and Brown (2003) pointed out, are

most likely to be well placed to take advantage of future change. The findings indicated that the online WIL opportunity enabled the students to work independently and increase their self-confidence, belief, awareness and appreciation of their normal work and personal life. Enhancing such aspects of self-management (Leong & Kavanagh, 2013) and self-efficacy (Freudenberg et al., 2013) are central to professional development through WIL experiences (Gardner, 2017).

Throughout the lockdown period, the students were creative, proactive, and pushed their comfort zones in developing appropriate physical activity for their different stakeholders, which as such may not have presented before the pandemic situation. Rampersad and Zivotic-Kukolj (2018) argued that the WIL experience is crucial in facilitating such opportunities, as it provides an experiential approach in nurturing innovation by creating new products and services, which in the case of these online experiences have provided further community engagement. The restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic presented the opportunity to fast track the development of the innovative online initiatives, some of which were scalable and sustainable, and have continued post-lockdown. The students' engagement with community stakeholders provided career development and networking (Jackson & Wilton, 2016) opportunities, which enhanced their community of practice (Wenger et al., 2002). These contacts, relationships and professional networks are particularly valuable in the sport industry (Fleming et al., 2009) in terms of potential future employment opportunities. A range of communication skills were developed, which are highly ranked graduate attributes (Hall et al., 2017). Both oral and written skills have been emphasized in enhancing employability (Oliver & Jorre de St Jorre, 2018), but this online opportunity also reinforced the importance of digital skills in the future of work (Jackson, 2018). Students highlighted leadership responsibility and ownership for their projects, whilst working online at home, and independently of their supervisors. This is an interesting and positive finding as previous research by Martin and Rees (2019a) reported that few WIL students realize the WIL experience develops leadership, despite them being placed in positions of responsibility for activity based at or through their industry workplace. This realization may have been due to a sense of autonomy from working remotely, but also highlights further attributes of the student, for example being proactive and demonstrating initiative. Being able to work independently points to a potential advantage of online WIL opportunities for some students in comparison to being face-to-face in the workplace.

## CONCLUSION

During the restriction enforced due to COVID-19, students' existing WIL placements were curtailed. However, for some students this provided an opportunity to work independently online developing a range of innovative and creative physical activity programs. The impact of these initiatives resulted in enhanced participation opportunities and engagement in physical activity for a range of children, athletes and fitness clients. The findings of this exploratory study indicated that from the students' perspective the online experience was an effective way of completing WIL, enriching capability, adaptability, flexibility and resilience. The period of online WIL also enabled the development of boundary spanning transferable skills and graduate attributes such as self-management, enterprise, leadership, networking, and effective communication.

There were several challenges relating to the online environment particularly related to the access to technology and it needing to be reliable and consistent (e.g. wireless communication). Although there were a number of lessons learned from WIL being moved online, it provided opportunities for independent and innovative creative work, with students needing to be adaptable and flexible, taking risks and opportunities to do things differently, thus building self-efficacy and capability. For other

practitioners who may need to transition their WIL activities online, particularly in sport and exercise, this opportunity reinforced the true value of the university experience, empowering students to learn in different ways and enhance self-efficacy. It provided synchronous opportunities to enhance student interaction, stakeholder connection and a sense of belonging. The initiatives were authentic, and provided real industry relevant projects, which added value to the organizations involved.

It is recommended that for future online opportunities, supervisors need to set clear expectations, professional standards of communication and safe practice, and explain the added-value proposition for students. The experience should be co-created by students and supervisors, allowing flexibility, adaptability and encouraging what works best for the students. Often it is the emotional immersion of students that is more important than physical immersion, where interaction, discussion and collaboration is student driven. This engagement and connection through the online opportunities was enjoyable, rewarding and appreciated by the students who were proactive, demonstrated initiative and worked independently. The value of critical reflection should be reinforced, as the experiential learning process may take longer online. Finally, it is important to remember that the technology is a tool to enhance student learning and should not drive the learning outcome. It is important to understand its limitations and challenges, as reported within this paper, and ensure the student's professional and personal development through the reflective process of integrating the theory with practice. However, as has been highlighted during the COVID-19 lockdown, there have been a range of different learning opportunities and activities for students to be involved in, and to engage with the community, albeit in an online capacity. This article demonstrates that it is possible to complete WIL online and that there are many possibilities and opportunities for WIL experiences using such a medium. It is anticipated that this article may encourage other practitioners to consider alternative approaches to WIL. As online WIL is likely to become an increasing alternative, further research should focus on gaining insights into potential different learning outcomes from such experiences.

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