An inclusive workplace framework: Principles and practices for work-integrated learning host organizations

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Work-integrated learning (WIL), as an educational approach, is facilitated through relationships between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and external 'host' organizations. Responsible host organizations should recognize that students undertaking WIL come from a range of different cultures, socio-economic backgrounds, and have varying academic, physical, and other capabilities. An inclusive workplace will seek to facilitate a positive and rewarding experience for all WIL students. Recent WIL literature has seen a strong focus on inclusive access to WIL. This article examines key elements that can contribute to host organizations providing an inclusive environment for students. Socio-cultural theories related to learning in the workplace are used as a theoretical lens. An Inclusive WIL Workplace Framework is proposed, highlighting principles, practices, and supervisor and co-worker characteristics, that can be utilized by workplaces to assess their inclusivity and address any gaps, and by students to understand the expectations of HEIs on host organizations.

Keywords: Inclusion, host organizations, equity, Indigenous, diversity

Work-integrated learning (WIL), as an educational approach, is facilitated through relationships and partnerships between Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and external 'host' organizations. For placement-based models of WIL (Zegwaard et al., 2022), the host organization provides opportunities and activities for authentic learning (Kaider et al., 2017), and supports students through supervision and mentoring, taking on a role as an educator (Fleming et al., 2021). While students are typically located physically in the workplace, recent changes in workplace dynamics have enabled remote work and eWIL (online) opportunities to become more common (Gamage, 2022; Wood et al., 2020).

WIL students come from a range of socio-economic or cultural backgrounds, with varying ages, gender identities, academic abilities, and/or physical and mental disabilities (Jackson et al., 2023). For some WIL students there may be a reluctance to disclose a disability (Dollinger et al., 2022) or their gender identity (Mallozzi & Drewery, 2019), to avoid the potential for discrimination or stigmatization. For international students, language proficiency can be a concern for both students and hosts (Jackson & Pham, 2021). Adjusting workplace culture and practices to accommodate the diversity of students undertaking WIL has been found to be challenging for some host organizations (Nolan et al., 2015) and leads to selection bias and issues of equitable student access to WIL (Mackaway & Chalkley, 2022). Students who are perceived by employers as capable of adding value, and have the potential to become future employees, are often favored by organizations for placement selection (Mackaway & Winchester-Seeto, 2018).

Inclusive WIL experiences, where student diversity is embraced, and equitable outcomes are achieved, is a claimed strategic priority for HEIs (Thompson & Brewster, 2022). Yet, with the widening participation agenda in WIL courses, ensuring equitable access to workplace-based WIL has become more challenging for practitioners who are managing WIL, as well as for host organizations and

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students. Challenges related to equitable access and inclusion are more evident in courses where students are expected to secure their own placements, rather than students being placed by the HEI (Mackaway & Chalkley, 2022).

Recent literature has seen a focus on equitable access to WIL. Authors have examined key challenges and issues faced for students when seeking, and/or gaining WIL placements (Goldman et al., 2023; Itano-Boase et al., 2021; Jackson et al., 2023; Mackaway & Chalkley, 2022; Mackaway & Winchester-Seeto, 2018; Mallozzi & Drewery, 2019; Pham et al., 2018; Thompson & Brewster, 2022). Goldman et al., (2023) also present a framework to examine decision-making processes that lead to inequitable access to WIL. Yet, less is reported in the extant literature about workplace inclusion once students have secured a placement. Anecdotal comments, often during student debriefings or reflections, highlight the challenges for some student groups to feel included in the workplace. However, what is clear, is that once a host accepts a student on placement, the organizations require appropriate expertise for supporting and supervising a diversity of students (Winchester-Seeto et al., 2022). There is a need for HEIs to protect students who are more vulnerable to explicit workplace biases. Host organizations should also have processes in place to manage associated risks. Hay and Fleming (2021) have proposed some useful strategies for both HEI's and hosts for managing risks in WIL, but published research on current practices related to workplace inclusion is limited.

This paper will examine key principles that underpin an inclusive workplace environment for student learning in a workplace setting. Socio-cultural theories related to learning through WIL will be discussed as a theoretical lens and applied to the features of an inclusive WIL workplace. Key risks associated with equity and inclusion in the workplace will also be discussed. An Inclusive WIL Workplace Framework is proposed that consists of principles and practices as well as the ideal characteristics of workplace supervisors and colleagues.

BACKGROUND

This section defines inclusion in the context of higher education and WIL, and the context of a workplace. Socio-cultural theories of learning are briefly outlined and applied to an inclusive workplace for WIL.

What is Inclusive Work-Integrated Learning?

As WIL is an educational approach, drawing on the educational literature for a definition of inclusion was deemed appropriate. Ainscow (2005) defines inclusion in an educational context, as, the "presence, participation and achievement of all students" (p.118). He describes inclusion as a process, and a search to find better ways to respond to diversity, involving the identification and removal of barriers, with an explicit focus on marginalized groups, or those at risk of exclusion. Hockings (2010) defines inclusive learning and teaching in higher education as:

> the ways in which pedagogy, curricula and assessment are designed and delivered to engage students in learning that is meaningful, relevant and accessible to all. It embraces a view of the individual and individual difference as the source of diversity that can enrich the lives and learning of others. (p.1)

Both these definitions align well with an inclusion agenda for WIL. In designing WIL curriculum, barriers need to be removed so that all students, particularly those in marginalized groups, have an

opportunity to access and participate in meaningful workplace-based learning, relevant to their course of study and career goals.

What is Inclusion in the Context of a Workplace?

Ferdman (2017) has reported a broad definition and describes an inclusive workplace as being where "people of all identities and many styles can be fully themselves while also contributing to the larger collective, as valued and full members" (p.235). In this definition, styles implies perspectives, values, attitudes or behaviours. With a focus on socially marginalized groups, Mallozzi and Drewery (2019) advocate for authenticity in inclusive workplace environments. Authenticity is where students can be themselves, where differences are embraced, and expression of these differences is supported.

Key features and practices of inclusion suggested by Shore et al., (2018) can be translated to a WIL workplace learning environment. These include WIL students:

- feeling safe (psychological and physical safety),
- being involved in the workplace team/ work group (feeling like an insider with access to information and resources),
- having a sense of belonging, and
- feeling respected and valued.

Also, Shore et al.,(2018) argue that the workplace needs to practice authenticity, which is the sharing of valued identities that may differ from others.

An inclusive WIL workplace is one in which practices of inclusion are evident at all levels of the organization. Positive perceptions of workplace inclusion by employees and WIL students can lead to increased job satisfaction, organizational commitment, individual well-being, and task effectiveness (Shore et al., 2018).

Socio-cultural Theories and Workplace Inclusion

Understanding how students learn through WIL is complex and as Eames and Cates (2011) attest, requires multiple theories rather than a single theoretical framework. John Dewey's views on the significance of experience and reflection for learning (Dewey, 1938/1997) and David Kolb's experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984/2014) have been proposed to help explain learning in the workplace. Other scholars (e.g., Leo Vygotsky, Jean Lave, and Etienne Wenger) have provided deeper perspectives on the social and cultural environment of a workplace, and how these enable and constrain the learning experience for students. This section will briefly outline the perspectives related to situated learning and communities of practice and how these apply to the achievement of an inclusive workplace environment for WIL.

Vygotsky (1978) maintained that the social environment and the way that learners interacted with other people and objects within that environment were critical for learning as "cognitive processes are the result of social and cultural interactions" (p. 84). Vygotsky also argued that psychological tools, such as language, symbols, and signs mediate learning and it is through social interactions, particularly with experienced colleagues, that these tools are acquired. Applying this to an inclusive workplace for WIL, co-workers and supervisors are the key mediators who are in the position to provide students with this access to important industry tools such as language and behavior. In doing so, this helps WIL students to acquire the socially and culturally derived artefacts or 'normal behaviors' of the workplace. WIL

students should be able to learn what to do and how to do by observing the actions of their co-workers, as well as through conversations with their workplace supervisors and colleagues. Social interaction with co-workers creates a potential for learning that would not exist without these interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). If there are inherent workplace biases held by supervisors or co-workers, WIL students (especially from marginalized groups) may have limited access to critical tools, artefacts, and social interaction, and this may impact the extent and quality of learning that can be achieved.

Lave and Wenger (1991) identify communities of practice as a sociocultural entity (a social learning system), which has importance for learning in the workplace. These communities are places where people participate in the social life of a workplace and where artefacts (such as those mentioned above) are used. The members of a community, such as experienced co-workers, generate and share knowledge during their informal interactions with one another. From this perspective, learning is situated in these interactions and social and physical environments. The opportunity for a WIL student to learn through these interactions depends on the extent to which they can fully participate in and become part of the community over the course of their placement. Therefore, an inclusive WIL environment is when there are no barriers to participation in authentic activities which make up the everyday practices of the profession, and students can contribute to the functioning of the workplace.

Drawing on socio-cultural perspectives, an inclusive workplace learning environment aligns well with the concept of WIL described by Eames and Bell (2005, p.153) as "a mediated, situated, and participatory activity within a socially and culturally determined community of practice."

Managing Equity-Related Risks

WIL is known to be a high risk activity, and key risk factors have been reported in the literature (Cameron, 2018; Fleming & Hay, 2021b). Host organizations (and HEI's) have an obligation for ensuring WIL students are safe and supported in the workplace environment (Cameron, 2018). Equity-related risks include exposure to bullying, discrimination, harassment, and workplace biases (Cameron, 2018). Appropriate workplace strategies to mitigate risks are particularly important for vulnerable students, who are part of a cultural or gender minority in the workplace, or who have a health-related or physical disability, which may be visible or invisible.

Fears around stigmatization in the workplace can be a concern for students, and choosing if or when, to disclose gender diversity or a disability is often a difficult decision (Apaitia-Vague et al., 2011; Dollinger et al., 2022; Thompson & Brewster, 2022). However, non-disclosure of a mental health or physical disability can create a health and safety risk for the host organization, (and the HEI), particularly where there is a need to implement accommodations to reduce the risks to both student and host (Cameron et al., 2020). Non-disclosure can increase the risk of students being exposed to events or circumstances which place themselves, or others at risk (Apaitia-Vague et al., 2011). The risk of physical or psychological harm are specific areas that need to be managed well.

Workplace behaviors that are not inclusive are rarely reported formally, as students are often unaware of how to report harassment or discriminatory behaviors, and some may be concerned about the impact on their evaluations or grades if they raise concerns (Apaitia-Vague et al., 2011). Robust pre-placement preparation processes for students and hosts, internal systems for incident reporting, workplace inductions and good relationship management between host and HEI are essential strategies to help minimize equity related risks (Fleming & Hay, 2021a).

PROCESS FOR DEVELOPING AN INCLUSIVE WIL WORKPLACE ENVIRONMENT

This section begins by outlining the design process employed by the authors to develop an Inclusive WIL Workplace Framework (hereafter called the Framework) that consists of a set of principles and practices and key characteristics of inclusive WIL supervisors or co-workers. The Framework, which provides host organizations with a structure to determine and assess their inclusiveness and identify areas that warrant further attention, is then presented. The Framework also establishes a benchmark for HEIs to consider the suitability of a host organization and students can utilize it to note the expectations on the workplaces in which they are undertaking their WIL experiences.

The Framework was developed by the authors as a response to their previous research that proposed, "the learning environment should also be one that enables success and limits exploitation, emotional, or physical harm. Universities and host organizations should both ensure risks to students are minimized" (Hay & Fleming, 2021, p. 550). The implementation of this Framework will contribute to this endeavor. Drawing on the definitions of inclusion above, the Framework was developed from a deliberate position of viewing diversity as a strength, rather than perpetuating deficit models of difference. As described by Autagavaia (2001, p. 50), "The sum total of one's personal and cultural resources is a critical force to be utilized in efforts to enhance professional practice."

The Framework also contributes to meeting new requirements in HEIs in New Zealand to support the safety and wellbeing of their learners which is now legislated in the *Education (Pastoral Care of Tertiary and International Learners) Code of Practice 2021* (NZQA, 2021). Of relevance is Part 4 that states, "Providers must foster learning environments that are safe and designed to support positive learning experiences of diverse learner groups" (p. 12) and, specifically that, "Providers must have practices for - reducing harm to learners resulting from discrimination, racism (including systemic racism), bullying, harassment, and abuse" (p. 12).

The Framework was developed using a stepped approach. As noted earlier, the authors had previously researched and published on understanding risks in WIL, risks to WIL students, and strategies for managing risks in New Zealand universities (Fleming & Hay, 2021a, 2021b; Hay & Fleming, 2021), and, as mentioned above, the findings from this project initiated the development of the Framework. This project received ethics approval from each of the authors' university ethics committees (Reference numbers: 19/110 and 4000020718). An important outcome from this research on risks was identifying student responsibilities and conduct for WIL, which noted, among other points, that students should:

- Take reasonable care for your own health and safety in the WIL environment, and
- Engage positively with the host organization and wider community (Hay & Fleming, 2021, p. 529).

While these may be reasonable expectations of WIL students, the authors identified that host organizations should also be providing an inclusive WIL environment. This led to the authors' reviewing the extant literature on inclusion, marginalization of WIL students, equity, access to WIL, theories of WIL, and models of good practice for WIL students. Also, due to the authors' observations of some Indigenous and students from minority cultures' experiences of marginalization and discrimination during their WIL courses, literature on Indigenous models of WIL (Eady et al., 2022) and decolonization (Thomas, 2020), were reviewed. This literature scan identified a gap in the literature that is addressed in this article.

Mindful of the sociocultural context in which the authors are situated, two other documents were also reviewed:

1. Ngā Tikanga Matatika Code of Ethics (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers [ANZASW], 2019).
2. Social Work Field Education Guidelines (ANZASW & Council of Social Work Education in Aotearoa New Zealand, 2016).

The ANZASW *Ngā Tikanga Matatika Code of Ethics* highlights seven *pou* or values that were developed following a sector-wide consultation project. The values, however, are also relevant for the wider WIL community as their meaning translates beyond the social work profession. The *Social Work Field Education Guidelines* were a collaborative development with WIL staff from seventeen HEIs in New Zealand as well as regulatory and professional bodies. The Guidelines note a commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the 1840 treaty with the Māori people) and to tangata whenua of Māori as the Indigenous people of New Zealand, signaling the importance of inclusive practice in social work WIL. Four domains that ensure successful WIL are identified including:

1. placement administration;
2. teaching and learning;
3. assessment; and
4. quality, and factors relating to inclusion are specified.

The authors also considered a model for Pacific WIL students that had extended previous work by Autagavaia (Hay & Mafile'o, 2022) and this became an additional guide for the principles to enable inclusion in WIL spaces. The model includes three domains: personal, cultural, and professional, and strongly emphasizes the importance of validating a Pacific student's cultural knowledge and identity to ensure success in WIL.

Following the literature scan, the authors drafted a set of principles and then refined these through a reflexive process of online and email discussion between the researchers as 'critical friends'. As Schuck and Russell (2005, p. 107) describe, "A critical friend acts as a sounding board, asks challenging questions, supports reframing of events, and joins in the professional learning experience". The final Framework (Tables 1, 2, & 3) was then agreed upon by both authors and is presented below.

Positionality

During their reflexive conversations, the authors were mindful of their own cultural identities as Pākehā (of European heritage) and that inclusive practice may challenge current WIL pedagogy that is based on Eurocentric ideas of learning, teaching and work (Eady et al., 2022; Tanaka & Zegwaard, 2019). For non-Indigenous WIL staff this may require ongoing, and perhaps, uncomfortable conversations about how the WIL curricula can be decolonized so that Indigenous knowledge can be recognized and valued and Indigenous students can be assured of culturally safe WIL spaces (Eady et al., 2022; Gair et al., 2015; Mooney et al., 2020). This led to further reflection on how WIL practitioners in HEIs can be allies (Thomas, 2020) with diverse students and seek to create more inclusive WIL spaces.

Four of the *pou* (values) from the ANZASW *Ngā Tikanga Matatika Code of Ethics* seemed to particularly align with the ideas of inclusivity in WIL, however, they are Māori concepts and, therefore, written in the Māori language (te reo Māori), which is not the ethnicity or culture of either author. Each value had been described in English and the intention of the principle could be labelled using English words.

As the authors are not Indigenous they do not lay claim to the Māori concepts but instead respectfully note they have relevance and appropriateness in the WIL context. While the authors are committed to supporting the inclusion of Indigenous concepts, principles, and knowledge in WIL scholarship and practice, they recognize that Indigenous WIL is to be led by Indigenous people (Eady et al., 2022). For this reason, English words have been used for the principles in the Framework.

THE FRAMEWORK

The following principles, practices, and characteristics in the Framework (Tables 1, 2, & 3) are not claimed as exclusive to any specific form of diversity. Instead, they are signposts that may provide host organizations with an initial benchmark to consider their inclusivity of all students, and areas where further change could be beneficial.

Principles for an Inclusive Work-Integrated Learning Host Organization

Four key principles have been identified as essential for WIL host organizations to be inclusive to WIL students (Table 1).

TABLE 1: Principles for inclusive work-integrated learning host organizations.

Principle	Definition
Self-determination	Workplaces value diversity and cultural identity. They advocate for and support self-determination and empowerment of students.
Belonging	Workplaces seek to strengthen relationships, connectedness, and to foster a sense of belonging.
Wellbeing	Workplaces attend to wellbeing (spiritual, emotional, psychological, and physical) of students and acknowledge the significance of students' strengths.
Care and respect	Workplaces are safe and supportive contexts for learning and development.

Practices for an Inclusive WIL Host Organization

The principles offer an initial structure for the Inclusive WIL Workplace Framework, however, the principles require operationalizing to become effective markers for good practice in host organizations. The following practices (Table 2) emphasize the value and strength of diversity in WIL workplaces and opportunities for all host organizations to become more inclusive as learning environments.

TABLE 2: Practices for an inclusive work-integrated learning host organization.

Principle	Practices
Self-determination	• Ensure different knowledges and identities are validated and incorporated into workplace practices and environment • Appreciate and celebrate differences (e.g., celebrate Pride week, neurodiversity week etc.) • Encourage student voice in the workplace context (e.g., enable safe opportunities for students to discuss their learning and reflections and offer feedback) • Ensure systems and processes recognize and cater for diversity and thereby enable student success
Belonging	• Provide opportunities for connection between students and workplace staff (e.g., mihi whakatau [culturally appropriate welcome], inclusion of students in formal and informal meetings and events) • Provide authentic and meaningful learning opportunities for the student • Facilitate relevant and supportive connections with others (e.g., Samoan student connecting with a Samoan colleague) • Culturally appropriate language and artefacts are used in the workplace (e.g., use of pronouns, correct pronunciation of languages, and workplace environment reflect the diversity of society)
Wellbeing	• Learn about the student's heritage, culture, whānau, aiga, family and lived experience • Engage staff in ongoing learning about diversity, discrimination, privilege, power, and bias • Management role-model anti-racist and non-oppressive practices • Wellbeing practices that are culturally safe and inclusive are supported • Student strengths are recognised and encouraged in the workplace • Ako (reciprocity in the teaching and learning process) is encouraged
Care and respect	• Respectful language and engagement occur with students • Ensure workplace processes are culturally appropriate and family (whānau, aiga), or other support are included as appropriate • Encourage students to actively participate in workplace practices and offer scaffolded and supported learning opportunities • Provide safe supervision experiences for students to develop self-reflection and self-awareness • Culturally safe practices occur pre- and during placement

Characteristics of Inclusive Work-Integrated Learning Supervisors and Co-workers

The following characteristics (Table 3) provide an indicative list expected of inclusive WIL workplace supervisors and co-workers. If these characteristics are evident then students are most likely to experience an inclusive WIL environment.

TABLE 3: Characteristics of inclusive work-integrated learning supervisors and co-workers.

Characteristics of inclusive WIL supervisors and co-workers	
• Welcomes and supports students • Appreciates others' strengths • Values uniqueness • Creates safe spaces for student learning • Enables connections to support the learning process • Challenges bias and discrimination • Allows and responds to student feedback • Supports equity	• Considers the use of positive discrimination practices to favor individuals who may be disadvantaged • Monitors policies and practices for inclusion and equity • Recognizes their own limitations • Takes responsibility for their own learning gaps • Are non-judgmental • Uses culturally appropriate language • Are an ally to students

IMPLEMENTING THE FRAMEWORK

There are multiple reasons as to why WIL host organizations should provide inclusive WIL workplaces to students. Reputation of organizations influence employment choices and supporting WIL students is frequently part of a broader workforce development strategy (Ferns et al., 2019). For instance, students who have positive WIL experiences may seek employment with their host organization or recommend it as a workplace to other potential employees (Drewery et al., 2019). As Jackson and colleagues (2023) explain, "…WIL has become inextricably associated with student employability and is globally recognised as a key lever in resolving graduate skills gaps" (p.3). Further, an inclusive workplace environment is beneficial for organizations as it celebrates diversity thus reducing conflict, encourages broader ideas and perspectives, and improves productivity (Ferns et al., 2019). Tolerance, appreciation of difference, and information sharing may also be positive outcomes from inclusive workplaces (Felton & Harrison, 2017; Shore et al., 2018). And, from a socio-cultural theory perspective, inclusive workplaces enable people to be themselves in a safe environment thus enabling them to contribute to the work of the organization as a valued member of the workplace community (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Shore et al., 2018). For students this may assist with establishing social connectedness through positive relationships with colleagues and developing a sense of belonging in the workplace (Ferns et al., 2019). Importantly, a whole of workplace approach is required for a student to feel included, and therefore leadership is required within WIL workplaces to ensure supervisors and co-workers are supportive of, and value social inclusivity and cultural diversity (Felton & Harrison, 2017; Ferns et al., 2019; Shore et al., 2018).

HEIs also have a responsibility for ensuring WIL students are in safe workplaces that are conducive to learning. WIL practitioners in HEIs must build relationships with their students, understand who they are, and what their specific learning needs may be (Hay & Mafile'o, 2022). Provision of support through cultural supervision (Gair et al., 2015; Mooney et al., 2020), engagement with family members (Hay & Mafile'o, 2022), and training for WIL host organizations on unconscious bias (Gair et al., 2015) are all

examples of ways in which inclusive WIL workplaces can be encouraged. In addition, workplaces should be encouraged to be explicit if they have particular requirements that may be barriers for some students. Exploration of inclusive practices that workplaces are implementing for WIL students would be a valuable area for future research.

The proposed Inclusive WIL Workplace Framework contributes to the field by offering an important evaluative tool suitable for use across the range of WIL disciplines in HEIs. The principles, practices, and characteristics are relevant to different types of diversity and can be further adapted for specific cultural or ethnic contexts. Indigenous WIL practitioners or Indigenous organizations may wish to re-develop the Framework to align with their own cultural norms, concepts, and beliefs.

The Framework can be incorporated into existing handbooks, training, and access agreements as part of improved health, safety, and wellbeing measures thus signaling the priority of diversity and inclusivity in HEIs. Student awareness of the Framework is also critical so that they understand the HEI's commitment to inclusion and the expectation that workplaces will provide a learning environment wherein diversity is appreciated, and discrimination and non-inclusive behavior is not tolerated. Following socialization to the Framework, additional measures can be taken by HEIs to educate students to be agents of their own inclusion in work-based placements. For example, during pre-placement processes, students can complete a risk assessment which includes consideration of their identity as well as their skills in self-advocacy and managing conflict. This also aligns with the aforementioned element that students should take reasonable care of their own health and safety in the WIL environment (Hay & Fleming, 2021). Finally, evaluation of the implementation of the Framework in WIL workplaces is necessary to assess its relevance and utility. This multi-pronged approach to implementing the Framework will contribute to minimizing equity risk in WIL workplace environments.

SUMMARY

HEIs have a responsibility for ensuring equitable and safe WIL learning environments for students. Access to WIL has been an important focus of previous research, however, greater attention needs to be on ensuring the environments within WIL host organizations are inclusive of all students, and especially those in traditionally marginalized groups. HEIs have a critical role in challenging privilege and power, including in the WIL context, and a proactive approach to ensuring WIL host organizations are inclusive is necessary.

The Inclusive WIL Workplace Framework endorses a celebration of diversity and difference and offers a structure for workplaces to actively address bias and discrimination (Gair et al., 2015). Ideally, this will then lead to supervisors and co-workers in WIL host organizations becoming allies of their students (Thomas, 2020), thus strengthening the learning of the students and, consequently, the knowledge and skills in the future workforce. In conclusion, it is acknowledged that the proposed Framework now requires implementation and evaluation to assess it is fit for purpose in contributing to advancing current practices in ensuring students are engaged in WIL in inclusive WIL host organizations. This, therefore, is a focus for future practice and research.

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