Authenticity and consistency in the assessment of work-integrated learning: Getting the balance right

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Work-integrated learning (WIL) has become an increasingly common feature of higher education curricula. Two aspects of WIL, authenticity and consistency, are valued in different ways by the stakeholders involved. Authenticity, by its very nature, supports the idea of learning being personalized and unique. Consistency, on the other hand, is focused on 'sameness'. This paper, set in the Irish context, considers the balance to be struck in attempting to optimize the authenticity of learning while simultaneously attempting to ensure consistency in its assessment. Following a participatory research and action approach, the study involved semi-structured interviews with key scholars in the field (n=7) and nine participatory workshops with groups of students, educators and practitioners across a range of disciplines and contexts (n=120). The findings touched on definitions, understandings, expectations, roles, contexts and priorities. Solutions are suggested and implications for practice and policy highlighted.

Keywords: Work-integrated learning, assessment, authenticity, consistency, solutions

Having the opportunity to go on a work placement, or work closely with an employer/industry partner on a project, can be one of the most authentic learning experiences a student in higher education can have (Ajjawi et al., 2020, 2022). Recent literature on authentic learning places such experiences high on the spectrum of authenticity, as they are strongly linked with real world learning (realism), encompass significant cognitive challenges and support students' evaluative judgement (Villarroel et al., 2018). From the perspective of students, learning experiences that are linked with what they describe as 'real world' are highly valued and felt to support their engagement with learning (O'Neill & Short, 2023). As Bosco and Ferns (2014) argue, proximity to practice can often be associated with diverse, highly contextualized and unique experiences for the individual student (Bosco & Ferns, 2014). When placements/industry projects are meaningfully linked with the curriculum, these experiential learning opportunities are often described as work-integrated learning (WIL) (Zegwaard et al., 2023). A key strength of WIL is that the student is exposed to different contexts, people and activities; that are unique authentic experiences.

When integrated into an accredited curriculum, there is a necessity for WIL to be assessed and this assessment can pose some challenges. One key challenge centers on endeavoring to ensure the fairness of the assessment - in particular the ideas of distributive fairness, which implies a fairness in the outcome, or grade distribution (Ling et al., 2020), and consistency of grading between rates and between contexts (Brennan, 2001; Miller et al., 2013). Both students and assessors can perceive a need for some 'sameness' (consistency) in how learning is assessed for the process to be deemed fair. Authenticity, by its very nature, supports the idea of learning being personalized and unique, while consistency, on the other hand, is focused on 'sameness.' This paper draws on interviews with international scholars (WIL researchers) as well as participatory workshops with students, educators and practitioners[2] in the Irish context to consider the balance to be struck in attempting to optimize the

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[2] The term 'practitioner' is used in this paper to describe staff external to the higher education institution who work with students while out on work placements, for example, industry employers, clinical/professional staff, engineers, teachers, etc.

authenticity of learning experiences while simultaneously attempting to ensure some consistency in its assessment.

Work-Integrated Learning

In Europe (European Commission, 2014) and in other countries internationally over the last 10 years, there has been a growing emphasis on the preparation of the student for the workforce, with an increased focus on embedding employability skills in the curriculum (Blackmore et al., 2016; Pallant et al., 2022). Ireland has also experienced this trend in its national higher education policies and practice (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, 2016; Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2022) and Irish students have been seen to value this approach. In a national study focused on the concept of student success in higher education, Irish students (n=887) identified 'developing skills to maximize employability' as their highest measure of success (National Forum, 2019) and, more recently, in an exploration of data from a multi-annual national survey on student engagement (n=93,743), 'real-life experiences' was identified as a key contributor to students' engagement in the curriculum (O'Neill & Short, 2023). Both nationally and internationally, therefore, WIL has become an increasingly common feature of higher education curricula. Zegwaard et al. recently described WIL as:

> An educational approach involving three parties - the student, educational institution, and an external stakeholder - consisting of authentic work-focused experiences as an intentional component of the curriculum. Students learn through active engagement in purposeful work tasks, which enable the integration of theory with meaningful practice that is relevant to the students' discipline of study and/or professional development. (Zegwaard et al., 2023, p. 38)

These authors emphasize the importance of the involvement of the work-place community in learning. There are many different types of WIL experiences, such as internships, clinical placements, fieldwork and co-operative learning, but it also includes project work that is strongly linked with the workplace/community. One element that distinguishes these projects from other more traditional projects is the extent to which practitioners in the workplace/community are involved.

Authentic and Consistent Assessment in a Work-Integrated Learning Context

Authentic assessment (Bosco & Ferns, 2014; Kaider et al., 2017; Wiggins, 2009) goes hand-in-hand with the assessment of WIL, as implied by the emphasis on authenticity in the definition of WIL above. Whereas the driver for WIL has been its link with work and industry, the prevalence of authentic assessment has been more driven from the movement away from traditional on-campus assessment, such as the examination or essay, which can sometimes have little perceived relevance to a student's anticipated future personal and/or work lives.

Authentic assessment encompasses assessments that are meaningful for the student and link with what they describe as real-world contexts. Many authors in the literature link it with the idea of the realism of the assessment, such as 'real-world' problems (Bosco & Ferns, 2014; Villarroel et al., 2018). However, authentic assessment is not only focused on links with the contested term 'real world' (O'Neill & Short, 2023), or employability, it has a wider understanding in the literature. For example, this assessment should be cognitively challenging (Elliott & Higgins, 2005; Newmann et al., 2007; Villarroel et al., 2018) and support students in their evaluative judgement, that is, learning to judge their own work (Tai et al., 2017; Villarroel et al., 2018). Authentic assessment emphasizes the importance of the context of the task (Gulikers et al., 2004; Swaffield, 2011; Villarroel et al., 2018; Wiggins, 2009) and the need to solve

important problems (Villarroel et al., 2018; Wiggins, 2009). More recent considerations emphasize the importance of student wellbeing and the relevance to society of the assessment (McArthur, 2022). Ashford-Rowe et al. (2013) further stress that feedback to students is key in authentic assessment and that collaboration with others is integral to this. In a recent theoretical exploration of authenticity in assessment, Ajjawi et al. (2023) critique some of the simplistic understandings of authenticity and favor the term 'authenticity in assessment' over the term 'authentic assessment,' foregrounding as it does 'an emergent quality of educational processes that students engage in rather than the quality of the assessment task' (p. 9). Despite some criticism, the perceived value of authenticity in assessment is growing amongst both staff (Tai et al., 2017; Villarroel et al., 2018) and students (O'Neill & Short, 2023) and it is increasingly seen as key in preparing students both for their futures beyond higher education and their contribution to society.

Consistency of grading in an assessment is often linked with the idea of an assessment's reliability, having been described as, for example, the achievement of the same result under similar conditions (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2013). This can sometimes seem at odds with the authenticity that is characteristic of WIL experiences, in which the conditions are usually not similar between students. In WIL there are different learning opportunities to demonstrate competence, and yet "consistency can only be achieved when assessors share a common understanding of the unit(s) of competency which is being assessed" (Further Education Support Service, 2015, p. 2). Assessment heavily dependent on the supervisor of WIL can be unreliable (McNamara, 2013). As with reliability, there are often four broad aspects to consistency: consistency over time (test retest), between assessors (interrater), across contexts and across tasks (Brennan, 2001; Miller et al., 2013). Various WIL authors have suggested solutions for how assessment consistency might be maintained. These include enhancements/adjustments to the:

- level of staff training on assessment (Roberts et al., 2014)
- clarity of criteria/standards (McNamara, 2013)
- number of assessors (Moonen-van Loon et al., 2015; Roberts et al., 2014)
- range of encounters/tasks (McNamara, 2013; Roberts et al., 2014), and developing a
- shared understanding of standards required (Herbert et al., 2014).

Consistency is key in ensuring that students are assessed fairly and accurately. It is, therefore, particularly a challenge when students are summatively assessed. This has a bearing on institutional and professional quality assurance and, as noted earlier, it is also strongly valued by students. When students describe the need for consistency in assessment it is often associated with the idea of fairness. In a study of the challenges faced by Irish physiotherapy students in the assessment of their clinical placement, for example, inconsistency of grading of assessment was highlighted as their greatest challenge. Students elaborated by noting that "some people mark you on your personality and how outgoing you are, not on your ability, this is not fair" and "some don't give 1sts" (O'Neill & McMahon, 2012, p. 166). Fairness has been described variously by authors as a) interactional, b) procedural and c) distributive fairness (Burger, 2017; Chory, 2007; Vander Schee & Birrittella, 2021).

These two aspects of assessment of WIL, authenticity and consistency, therefore, are valued highly and in different ways by the range of stakeholders involved. The methodology employed in this study to explore the optimal balance between these concepts in WIL contexts in Ireland will now be detailed.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher, the author of this paper and an educational developer, set out to conduct research that would be beneficial for those involved and, therefore, a participatory research and action (PRA),

sometimes described as the 'Participatory Learning and Action' (de Brún et al., 2017), approach was selected (Chambers, 2015; O'Neill & McMahon, 2012). By using this approach, the workshop participants would benefit from immediate ideas for their practice. This established approach has its roots in participatory rural appraisal (Chambers, 2015; Rayesa et al., 2023) which aims to allow communities, originally developing countries striving to improve their living conditions, to be empowered in the solutions to their own challenges. The approach has numerous benefits and is also particularly suited to research aiming to address complex questions amongst multiple stakeholders. In employing PRA, a number of methods were used. The study initially involved semi-structured interviews with key expert scholars (researchers) in the field of WIL, followed by participatory workshops with groups of students, educators and practitioners across a range of disciplines and contexts in Ireland. Ethical approval was sought and approved for the research in 2020 (National Forum Ethics reference number NFREC: 20-04). Drawing from the overarching focus of this research, the main research questions were as follows:

- Q1: What views do WIL scholars hold on the appropriate balance between authenticity and consistency? (Semi-structured interviews with expert scholars)
- Q2: With respect to authenticity and consistency in WIL, what challenges are faced within different contexts and between different roles? (Participatory workshops)
- Q3: What insights can be gained for how the balance between authenticity and consistency can/should be optimized in a WIL context? (both methods)

Semi-Structured Interviews

The decision to begin the study with semi-structured interviews with expert scholars in the field was rooted in a wish to delve deeper than an initial exploration of the published research would allow. It was considered that such scholars would have spent significant time steeped in the practice and theory of WIL and its assessment, having conducted related research across a range of contexts, and their insights would provide valuable framing for the research and subsequent workshops. Semi-structured interviews allowed for the topic of the research to be discussed in a focused, yet meaningful manner. Participating scholars were identified through a literature search on authenticity and consistency in the assessment of WIL. Priority was given to those who a) had published, as lead author, on this topic within a list of key established peer-reviewed journals and b) had conducted empirical research in this area in the last ten years. Efforts were made to have a geographical spread, including at least one scholar from the Irish context, if possible. Seven authors were contacted and agreed to participate in the research. They were based in Australia (x2), Canada, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands and South Africa. It is acknowledged that this approach may not represent a diversity of WIL cultures.

A one-hour semi-structured interview was conducted online with each scholar and subsequently thematically analyzed (Braun & Clarke, 2013) using MaxQDA. Interviews focused on participants' understandings of authenticity (56 codes emerging) and consistency (18 codes emerging), and the balance between the two (29 codes emerging). The findings section discusses the key themes that were identified following analysis. Initial analysis of the scholar interviews assisted in informing the subsequent participatory workshops.

Participatory Workshops

The intention in selecting groups to participate in the participatory, solution-focused workshops was to have a range of WIL contexts and a range of discipline areas represented. In addition, it was intended that each workshop would involve participation by the three key stakeholder groups (students,

educators and practitioners). After a national call for participation, nine discipline groups, across eight different higher education institutions, were selected, representing a range of WIL contexts and discipline areas (Table 1). Participatory workshops allow for group discussion and consensus building across stakeholder groups, a key aim of the research, and an essential component of the PRA approach (Chambers, 2015; de Brún et al., 2017; O'Neill & McMahon, 2012). This type of consensus was considered to be valuable, as the solutions to their assessment challenges emerging as part of the workshops, would be more likely to be actioned if the stakeholders were involved in their development. Participation would, therefore, be of concrete benefit to those involved. Three categories of WIL context were identified for the purpose of this research, these were described as Type A, B, and C (Table 1).

TABLE 1: Work-integrated learning contexts and disciplines in the workshops.

WIL Context Type	Discipline
Type A: On-campus WIL experiences primarily assessed by an *educator* (higher education staff) e.g., project- or problem-based learning.	Civil Engineering (n=15) Diagnostic Radiography (n=8)
Type B: Off-campus work placements primarily assessed by an *educator* (higher education staff) e.g., internships, co-operative placements, work experiences.	Hospitality (n=17) Survey & Construction Management (n=7) Teacher Education (Physical Education) (n=13) Business Information Systems (n= 14)
Type C: Off-campus work placements primarily assessed by a *practitioner.* This includes many of the professional validated course experiences e.g., clinical, professional, fieldwork placements.	Occupational Therapy (n=19) Veterinary Nursing (n=16) Physiotherapy (n=11)
Total	120 participants

Table 1 illustrates the breakdown with respect to discipline area and WIL context and all groups agreed to ensure participation by students, educators and practitioners. In all, 120 participants took part across the nine workshops (40 students, 41 educators and 39 practitioners). Each group participated in a three-hour online workshop. Methods advocated in PRA were employed throughout (Chambers, 2015; de Brún et al., 2017; O'Neill & McMahon, 2012). Each workshop began with a poll to gain a broad view on whether participants felt authenticity and/or consistency was their greatest challenge. Following this, the participants elaborated on their key individual challenges using virtual post-its (Jamboard). This allowed differing participant views to be identified. The use of breakout groups then supported discussion on the identification of some key shared challenges which were collated, inputted into and then ranked in a second poll by all in the workshop. This assisted in gaining a group consensus of the participants, a key aspect of PRA (Chambers, 2015; de Brún et al., 2017). Choosing their three top-rated shared challenges, a second breakout session then focused on the development of some shared solutions to these challenges and initial work on identified actions. After each workshop, a report of the process and all outputs was shared immediately with all participants to facilitate their further

engagement in the topic beyond the research timeline. This gave them some ownership of their data, another key feature of PRA.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Views of the Expert Scholars on Authenticity and Consistency

In relation to authenticity, the expert scholars highlighted that to be described as authentic both the learning experience and the assessment should be 'real' and 'genuine', language resonating with that used by Morley and Jamil (2020). It should approximate the workplace context, working with colleagues, doing what the students feel they should be doing, "what really matters to them and their goals" (Scholar 3). Bosco and Ferns (2014) also describe this proximity to practice as a key indicator of authenticity. The scholars emphasized the importance of exploring "whose authenticity" is being described, i.e., the student's perception of authenticity or that as perceived by the workplace. It needs to be a shared understanding of authenticity, with the student and the practitioner being co-constructors of this perception: "… unilaterally deciding assessment from the university perspective criteria…that's not authenticity… if the workplace isn't involved and the student isn't involved, you need a shared understanding amongst the whole group and it's dynamic, it's continuously changing." (Scholar 3).

Authenticity, the scholars maintained, includes the development of students' personal and professional identity, who they were becoming. In particular, some students' development of the persona of the profession. This is in keeping with recent thoughts on authenticity of assessment (Ajjawi et al., 2023) describing this as ontological fidelity, in other words relating the assessment to their own emerging lives. In this regard, a development of this idea is that students be empowered in assessment, for example in their self-evaluation and judging their own work. There were mixed views amongst the scholars on the role of practitioners in assessment. Some noted that practitioners assess all the time and therefore have a strong role to play in assessment and feedback. However, those scholars involved more in on-campus tasks that are authentic in their intended design (Type A) suggested that it is not always necessary for practitioners to assess these tasks for them to be called 'authentic. Authenticity, they noted, is on a spectrum and the design of assessment should strive to be as authentic as possible. The idea of a spectrum/continuum of authenticity is also advocated by others nationally in Ireland (National Forum, 2017) and internationally (Ajjawi et al., 2023; Bosco & Ferns, 2014). A strong view held by some was that although the on-campus experience is not the same as practice, it can be made very authentic. A well-designed campus-based project can be more authentic than a poorly-designed work experience. For example, one participant described a campus-based workshop with 'charismatic entrepreneurs':

> And then afterwards, they networked … they mingled afterwards … that's authentic. And it happened here in one of our workshops. If the students hadn't met people like, I couldn't expect them to go out into the real world and suddenly connect with people like that … None of this happens by accident. Somebody doesn't just become a great networker. Yeah, someone helps them, mentors them and networking was a big part of it. Yes. So it's preparing them for that journey. (Scholar 2)

It was felt that the terminology needs consideration. For example, it was suggested that the term 'authenticity' can be overused. O'Neill and Short (2023) found that Irish students are more inclined to describe authentic experiences as 'real-world' experiences and the term work-integrated learning is an increasingly common term that is useful for describing the spectrum of authentic experiences

(Zegwaard et al., 2023). In relation to the participating scholars' understanding of consistency, there were two broad interpretations of consistency; consistency of the assessment outcomes (grades) and consistency of the experience that might lead to assessment differences. As in the literature (Brennan, 2001; Miller et al., 2013), the scholars also alluded to the different types of assessment consistency, i.e., consistency between markers, between contexts, over time and between tasks. Consistency between markers (or interrater reliability) was mentioned most often and some highlighted that this was influenced by context. Consistency was described as more of a challenge in contexts where practitioners and associated professional bodies were involved, often linked with consistency of experience in the context. In these contexts, one scholar noted that students need to be:

> exposed to all the things they need to be exposed to, so I do acknowledge that. And from a professional accreditation perspective, there are regulations that need to be met, and so the consistency of experience is important in that situation. (Scholar 6)

This was also echoed when describing consistency of tasks. Some mentioned that the tasks students complete can be very different. For example, there may be broad outcomes but different projects. This led to some participants' use of the term 'equivalent.' There can be differences in the task, not consistent, but they may be equivalent. Equivalence, for example, in how they achieve a grade. There were also other concepts associated with the word consistency. For example, one scholar preferred the term comparability and another described reproducibility as a concept, "reproducibility, so being consistent over time" (Scholar 4). Sharing their views on the balance between the two concepts, the expert scholars acknowledged the tension that can exist between authenticity and consistency. This was expressed very well by one of the scholars, who noted that:

> If we think about what could be intended with consistency, it's that idea of standardization, so if you want everything to be the same or equal or equivalent across students, then that, by its very nature, can't … it will be in tension with authenticity because it won't necessarily bend and flex to the situation and to the individual's goals and desires and expectations and the needs of the workplace and that's the tension … the tension between standardization and authenticity. (Scholar 3)

Scholar 5 elaborated on this as he noted:

> I think that it's very difficult to make an accurate assessment of experiential learning … because what you normally want assesses let's say learning outcomes, such as communication skills or team work, and then it becomes very difficult to actually assess that because you cannot make an exam. You can observe and you can make presentations and this kind of things, but it's quite difficult to be very objective about this, this sort of assessment. So yes, I think it's a very difficult thing to solve, it's really a problem in that people have to think a little bit more about it because it's not yet solved.

Interestingly, many of the expert scholars went on to indicate that consistency was less of a concern for them; there was a strong tipping of the balance towards authenticity. They felt a rich authentic experience was more valuable than a controlled consistent one. It was, they indicated, acceptable to not assess accurately if it was authentic, to focus more on the learning One participant put it very strongly when she said that some of the students:

are going to be getting this really rich experience and some of them are going to be getting less than and it strikes me that consistency could be the death of this programme, that has, you know, amazing outcomes for most students. (Scholar 6)

However, there was also some more nuanced discussion around how these concepts could reside on a spectrum that has some elements of both, that they don't have to be viewed as polar opposites. One example was explained:

> Health professions are heavily regulated, the accreditation standards that are common across all programmes are usually the national standards and the idea there is that they unify a vision for what we are expecting our graduates to look like and because it's very vocational and agreed upon by the community of practice itself, it can, in a sense, bridge different experiences. Offering standardization, but at the same time a level of authenticity, because it is the language of the profession, it's sanctioned by the profession. (Scholar 3)

Ajjawi et al. (2023) similarly highlights that to increase an assessment's authenticity it may need to be weighted against other concerns, such as reliability. Bates et al., in 2019, also maintained that assessment design requires compromise between contextualization and standardization and they, similar to the expert authors in this study, suggested that the educational impact and validity of the assessment might not be worth sacrificing in the pursuit of reliability, a term often associated with the idea of consistency. O'Neal (2016) however refutes the idea that authentic assessment cannot be reliable. He maintains that numerous avenues have been developed to maintain reliability while increasing authenticity. He also usefully presents the idea, as did Ajjawi et al. (2023), Bosco and Ferns (2014), and the expert scholars in this study, that authenticity could be viewed on a spectrum.

In summary, the expert scholars in this study appeared to value both authenticity and consistency of assessment while acknowledging the tension that can arise between the two. Although they echoed other authors' views on the value of considering the authenticity of assessment as being on a spectrum, as a group they valued authenticity over consistently due to its centrality to meaningful student learning.
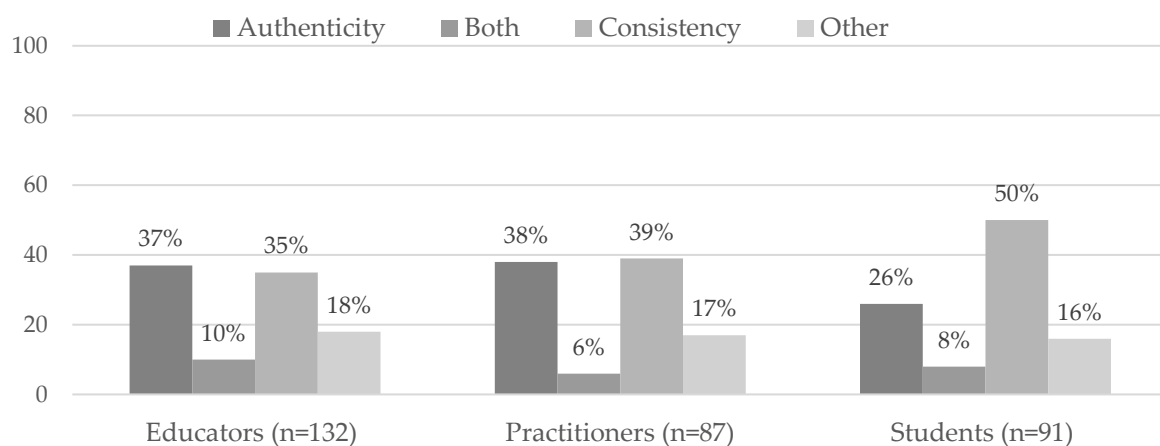
Authenticity and Consistency across Different Contexts and Roles

The participatory workshops allowed for an exploration of challenges faced across various WIL contexts and assessment roles in endeavoring to find the optimal balance between authenticity and consistency. Three contexts were of particular interest, as outlined previously: the on-campus WIL context (project/problem-based learning) primarily assessed by the educator (higher education staff) (Type A); the off-campus work placements, primarily assessed by an educator (higher education staff) (Type B); and the off-campus work placements, primarily assessed by a practitioner (Type C). In addition, three different roles were of particular interest: the student, the educator and the practitioner, all of whom were represented in all workshops. Across the three different context types, consistency of assessment was considered a proportionally greater challenge than authenticity, with close to three-quarters of the 120 participants highlighting it as the greater challenge. The challenge of consistency was proportionally highest in Type C (69% of 46 participants), where practitioners were involved in assessment. The context type that found consistency the least problematic was the on-campus context (Type A), with less than half of participants considering consistency the key challenge. Interestingly, although the data should be considered carefully due to the relatively small sample size, authenticity of assessment was seen as a marginally higher challenge in the off-campus context, assessed by educators, than in the on-campus context (34% of 51 versus 30% of 23 participants, respectively). This

finding is best considered alongside the reflection by some of the expert scholars who noted that, if designed well, on-campus projects can be very authentic. This also highlights the value of a WIL definition, such as that of Zegwaard et al. (2023), including these types of on-campus experience.

To explore the views of different WIL stakeholders on the degree of challenge posed by authenticity and consistency, participants (student, educators, practitioners) were asked to individually describe, using virtual post-it notes, the specific challenges they face with respect to WIL assessment. Over the nine workshops, 310 post-it notes were produced. These were analyzed and themed, using a deductive coding approach, to the predefined codes of authenticity, consistency, authenticity and consistency (both) or other challenges. As there were different numbers of notes per stakeholders, Figure 1 sets out their weighting in percentage of the total for each stakeholder group.

FIGURE 1: Percentage weighting of stakeholders' challenges on post-it notes.

Results from educators and practitioners indicated a relatively equal weighting between challenges related to authenticity and consistency, whereas the student results indicated a higher weighting for challenges related to consistency – double that of challenges related to authenticity. To give a sense of the challenges described by students in relation to consistency, the post-it of one student read: "Some educators don't understand the competencies so they find it hard to mark them." This was echoed by an educator who noted that: "practice educators (practitioners) interpret competencies differently."

Grading matters to students and therefore it is not surprising, given its high-stakes nature, that students would be more concerned about this. Inconsistency in assessment was also identified as a key challenge for students in an earlier study by O'Neill and McMahon (2012). In addition, O'Connor et al. (2018) elaborated on this when they found that many students perceived that a) achieving high grades was depended on the amount of support in a placement, b) some assessors were reluctant to award higher grades and c) higher education institutions actively discouraged higher grades. The present study adds to this body of evidence suggesting that students have particular concerns around the consistency of WIL assessment.

Optimizing the Balance between Authenticity and Consistency

Drawing on the data from both the scholar interviews and the solution-focused workshops, three broad themes were identified related to optimizing the balance between authenticity and consistency: 1)

clarifying and simplifying expectations for the key stakeholders, 2) empowering students in the assessment process, and 3) supporting practitioner training.

1. Clarifying and simplifying expectations for the key stakeholders

The strongest theme identified, in particular from the workshop participants, related to a need to clarify expectations for the assessment of WIL. The group from Hospitality suggested that one solution was the "clear communication of learning outcomes required for all stakeholders." Similarly, Civil Engineering suggested the need to "take steps to ensure that students understand the context and scope of the assignment." Business Information Systems suggested the need to build a series of resources and briefing sessions to guide employer and student expectations. In an exploration of the literature on the role of the practitioner ('host supervisor'), Rowe et al. (2012) also identified the common challenge of lack of clear expectations in this regard. One of the solutions offered by these authors was the use of an analysis and reflection tool that helped clarify the roles of the different stakeholders. Clarification could also be enhanced by more inter-stakeholder dialogue. For example, the Teacher Education group suggested the need for more dialogue between their tutors and students. This was also advocated as an important solution across the other contexts, including the assessment of on-campus experiences. A common suggested solution was the need for the outcomes to be clear, but it was emphasized that this did not mean that there should be lots of competencies. In fact, there was a very strong leaning toward a reduction in the number of outcomes used in assessment, in particular where the same set of competencies were assessed across different contexts. The Survey and Construction Management group suggested they needed to "develop a set of manageable expectations that could be assessed as desirable and/or essential."

Many advocated for the use of simple less specific grading scales. For example, the Occupational Therapy group advocated for the use of a competent/not yet competent form of grading, as it supports clearer and more simplified expectations. This solution, they maintained, minimized the challenge of consistency across different contexts and the Teacher Education group suggested it would also "help develop student openness." One tension identified with the use of these types of scales (pass/fail; competent/not yet competent) was the level of value that might be attributed to them in institutional grading scales and the Physiotherapy group, in particular, highlighted the need for this to be explored further at institutional level. Hanson et al. (2013) took this one step further to suggest that that narrative descriptions should replace grades and numerical ratings in medical education in the US, while Tannock (2017) recommends a move away from grades altogether in higher education.

2. Empowering students in the assessment process

Some suggested solutions aimed to both support consistency and enhance authenticity. Many of these suggestions related to the idea of student empowerment. The expert scholars, for example, suggested that although having the same broad criteria was valuable for consistency, students could have some control in how they demonstrated these criteria. The Diagnostic Imaging group suggested the need to allow students to choose an alternative to their assessed presentations whereas Hospitality indicated an intention to explore allowing students to have the option of choosing to create a video diary as an alternative to written reports. In addition, many suggested that students should have some control over whether they needed to achieve all criteria in all opportunities. For example, the Survey and Construction Management group suggested that "students could choose their skills for assessment from a defined list." It was suggested that students should be more involved in the setting of their expectations (Business Information Systems) and should have a role in giving feedback on the compilation of the assessment form used in placement (Veterinary Nursing). Learning contracts/agreements is one tool that could support this process. These were suggested and advocated

by many participants in this study and represent an approach that has been widely advocated by others in the field (Boud et al., 2020)

3. Supporting training and recognition of practitioners

The expert scholars in this study emphasized the importance of the practitioner being involved in assessment in order for it to be considered 'authentic,' a stance also supported by other authors in the literature (Bosco & Ferns, 2014; Zegwaard et al., 2023). However, in contexts where practitioners were involved in assessment and/or feedback in this study, it was suggested that there is a need for further training and support for these staff to support the consistency of their assessment and feedback. Students, as noted earlier, were particularly concerned about the consistency of assessment and this was also noted by McNamara (2013) who highlighted that many work-based supervisors' assessments may not be reliable and they may not have the specialized skills required for assessing students consistently. The proposed solutions for enhancing the support and training of these practitioners spanned a wide range including specialized training sessions (Hospitality; Business Information Systems: Veterinary Nursing), making this training mandatory (Occupational Therapy), peer mentorship (Teacher Education; Physiotherapy), and the development of guidelines (Teacher Education). In some discipline areas there was a desire to take steps to formalize the role (Teacher Education; Veterinary Nursing) and to incentivize these practitioners (Veterinary Nursing; Physiotherapy). Staff training, similarly, was one proposed approach to enhance the reliability of the practitioner ratings of students who were assessed by portfolio on a community clinical placement in a US medical programme (Roberts et al., 2014). A particular form of staff support described by O'Neal in medical education (2016) and in the general assessment literature (Herbert et al., 2014) is the development of assessor discussions around the expectations of the standards. This is often described as an assessor Community of Practice and links with the peer mentoring suggestions in this study.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

It is hoped that this participatory research study has contributed to understandings of the challenges and possible solutions associated with balancing authenticity and consistency in the assessment of WIL. Although representing a range of disciplines in the workshops, the study has some limitations as it focuses on WIL in the Irish context and, as the researcher was also the workshop facilitator, it could be open to unintentional bias. As is appropriate to the PRA research methodology, the study explored this topic through the lens of the key stakeholders involved, while also considering the very useful insights of experts scholars in the field. To conclude, some key implications of the findings for national and institutional practice and policy are presented below.

Authenticity and Consistency can be in Tension with Each Other

There was an agreement that these concepts were on occasion in tension with each other and therefore it important that in the design stage of assessment that staff give careful consideration to when and where in the curriculum these concepts may receive more weighting. Is there scope in the curriculum for more emphasis on consistency later in the program after students have had more feedback opportunities? Do some disciplines and contexts require more emphasis on authenticity? These questions would benefit from further study to gain a more nuanced understanding of the tension between these two concepts.

Authenticity is Usefully Perceived as on a Spectrum

Authenticity is a complex term and was described differently by different stakeholders. It did not always relate to whether a student was on placement; on-campus opportunities were characterized by high levels of authenticity for many. This requires students, educators and practitioners to develop a more nuanced understanding of the term and how it is used. It also supports the understanding that WIL can be both an on- and off-campus authentic opportunity.

Students and Practitioners can Differ in the Weighting of Concepts

The findings of this study suggest that staff and students may not afford the same weighting to these two concepts. Students who experience the impact of grading are very in tune with the fairness of these grades. They expect them to be distributed and obtained in a consistent manner and this is not always their experience. This finding has implications for the type of grading scales used in different contexts, with the more sensitive scales (such as percentages and grades) being particularly challenging. Institutions and other agencies, such as professional bodies, need to discuss these options further to maximize fairness in grading. Staff were more concerned with the authenticity of the assessment, when the two concepts were considered together. This in itself is not problematic, but staff need to be aware that students may rate consistency more strongly.

Consistency of Practitioner Assessment is a Perceived Challenge

The role of the practitioner in assessing was deemed very valuable. However, there appeared to be greater concern about consistency in contexts where they had responsibility for assessment. At times the practitioner, and the students, suggested that they were unclear on the expectations of them and in addition the nature of the 'form' used was problematic. As practitioners were seen as key to enhanced assessment, but may struggle with achieving consistency in assessment, the need for more support and training for this group was advocated.

Solutions to Optimizing the Balance between Authenticity and Consistency

Based on some of the above findings, three key solutions were presented to optimize the balance between authenticity and consistency. The most frequently mentioned solution was the need to clarify and simplify expectations for the key stakeholders, and participants elaborated on how this might best be achieved. The importance of empowering students in the assessment process was noted by many, in line with a strong movement in higher education towards students as partners in assessment and as noted above practitioner training is important.

There are growing drivers in higher education for preparing students for the workforce and for developing more authentic learning experiences, but there is an expectation that this be achieved in a consistent and fair manner. I hope that this paper will help in ensuring we get this balance right.

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