Students' experiences of distress during work-integrated learning

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While work-integrated learning (WIL) is praised as effective for providing opportunities for knowledge, skills, and value development in authentic workplaces, student experiences may not always be positive. In New Zealand, the *Education (Pastoral Care of Tertiary and International Students) Code of Practice* [Pastoral Care Code of Practice] (2021) requires tertiary providers ensure the wellbeing and safety of their learners. This article analyses survey data on social work students' experiences of distress during WIL. Results suggest students experienced different distresses, but financial hardship and feeling unsupported on placement were particularly impactful. Material impacts from these and other stressors included reduced confidence, anxiety, adverse physical or mental health, and sleep disruption. The participants utilised personal strategies to manage distress and had mixed experiences of receiving information and support from their tertiary institution. To mitigate distressing experiences recommendations to improve current systems and processes as well as individual students' experiences will be outlined.

Keywords: Distress, wellbeing, work-integrated learning, social work, financial hardship, mental health

In the higher education sector there is greater recognition of wellbeing for students and the need for structures to support this during their programme of study. In New Zealand, an impetus for the focus on wellbeing is the Pastoral Care Code of Practice which was introduced in 2021 to ensure learners enrolled with Higher Education Institutions (HEI) are safe and supported (New Zealand Government, (2021) The code has implications for work-integrated learning (WIL) particularly in terms of ensuring WIL programmes are inclusive and accessible to all students, and that host organisations are adequately prepared to support students. Another reason for the increased focus on wellbeing comes from students themselves, particularly those for whom unpaid placements are a compulsory component of their study. Professional practice students from disciplines such as nursing, speech language therapy and social work are voicing concerns about the stress and financial burden of placements and advocating for a living wage during WIL (Ellingham, 2024). Similar lobbying in Australia has resulted in the introduction of a practice payment for teaching, nursing, midwifery and social work students while they are undertaking placements (Duffy, 2024). These actions highlight the significance of distress and the contextual factors that perpetuate these impactful experiences for students during WIL.

Addressing distress during WIL can make important contributions to the social, economic, personal, and physical dimensions of student wellbeing (Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2018). Distress is understood as the subjective experience of anxiety, sadness, irritability, self-consciousness and emotional vulnerability (Winefield et al., 2012), although it would be a mistake to define distress merely in psychological terms. The social determinants of health emphasise that distress is perpetuated by distinct and diverse social contextual factors including the effects of poverty, gender inequities, social

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discrimination based on race, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, social exclusion and workplace stress (Jacob, 2016). In New Zealand, a large-scale survey of university students' mental health (with 1,762 participants) found that most student respondents had a moderate level of distress with over half identifying academic anxiety and nearly a third indicating financial hardship as the primary stressors (Gharibi, 2018). In higher education, distress has been associated with poor academic performance, low engagement and adverse impacts on students' capacity to study (van Agteren et al., 2019).

This paper discusses the first phase quantitative findings of a mixed method study examining social work students' experiences of distress during WIL in New Zealand. The aim of this research is to explore the sources of distress and tension students experience as part of their practicum learning during social work education. Participant experiences of how these sources of tension or distress were managed (or not) are also examined, in order to consider the systems and structures that can proactively reduce student distress during WIL. In the following section we provide a brief overview of the existing research literature on distress during WIL. We then outline the methods utilised in our study and the key findings. Finally, the implications from our analysis are discussed with a focus on some important steps tertiary providers and host organisations can implement to more effectively support students during WIL.

DISTRESS DURING WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING – A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

There are a range of personal, relational and contextual issues that are stressful for students during WIL including the negative effects of placement on family life, lack of study-work-life balance and stressful work experiences and dynamics. And while it's often the intersection of these factors, rather than a single issue that creates distress, (Grant-Smith et al., 2018), certain factors are particularly impactful. Of significance is financial stress during WIL, with a growing body of literature attesting to the pressures unpaid placements create for students. In New Zealand, a recent study of social work students' experiences of financial stress during study with 353 participants found that over 35% of participants had missed classes or placement because of insufficient funds for petrol or public transport (Bartley et al., 2024). In a study of Australian social work and human services students' experiences on WIL (with 212 participants), Johnstone et al. (2016) report the majority of participants found field placement forced them to spend less time in paid employment, that it impacted negatively on their financial situation and caused them to have increased expenses such as additional travel and professional clothing. Overall, 63% of participants felt very tired and anxious trying to balance paid work and placement. Similar findings are evident in research on other professional practice programmes where unpaid placement is a requirement. Usher et al.'s (2021) study of Australian nursing students' experiences of mandatory WIL (with 2,359 respondents) found the majority of participants (79%) experienced financial hardship, two-thirds of participants were unable to work during WIL and one-third incurred a financial liability from their placement. Of the students who participated in the study, 62% of participants identified issues with health and wellbeing as a result of financial hardship which was significantly associated with reduced enjoyment of placement (Usher et al., 2021, p. 4). As Bradley et al. (2020) note these pressures are exacerbated for students undertaking remote or rural WIL. Their investigation of nursing and allied health students on placement in rural and regional Victoria, Australia found financial stress from costs incurred from accommodation, vehicle maintenance, fuel, food and ongoing rent or mortgage payments at home as well as placement accommodation costs were significant stressors. Hodge et al. (2021) argue the impact of the financial costs and burden that result from unpaid placements are borne more by female students enrolled in female-dominated programmes such as nursing, social work and teaching who, compared to predominantly male students in programmes,

such as trades, medicine and engineering, do not have access to paid placements, internships and apprenticeships.

Another major source of stress during WIL is the experience of bullying and harassment which includes various forms of verbal, racial, physical and sexual abuse (Birks et al., 2018, p.47). Apprenticeship learning in the building and construction industry is renown as having a masculine, bullying culture and adversely impacting on the mental health of the mainly young male apprentices who undertake this training (Greacen & Ross, 2023; Riggall et al., 2017; Ross et al., 2021). In professional practice WIL, a significant body of work on bullying comes from the field of nursing, where research on clinical placements found 40-50% of nursing students had experienced bullying/harassment with registered nurses being the main perpetrators of harassment (Birks et al., 2018; Budden et al., 2017; Minton et al., 2018). The majority of students report that the experience of being bullied/harassed impacted on their mental health with some participants reporting self-harm and suicidal thoughts and numerous others suffering from panic attacks, anxiety attacks, stress-related chest pain, altered sleep patterns, and physical illness (Birks et al., 2018; Budden et al., 2017; Minton et al., 2018). Minton et al.'s (2018) study with 296 nursing student respondents was undertaken in New Zealand, and they found a greater proportion of Indigenous Māori students had been bullied (46.3% compared to 36.4% New Zealand European) with 20% of Māori participants identifying they had experienced at least one racist remark on placement. There is some indication from other WIL fields that students' experience of bullying and harassment is particularly impactful. Grant-Smith et al.'s (2018) research sampled 172 students from a range of WIL programmes in Australia, finding that although the numbers of students experiencing abuse and harassment were low, all were associated with high levels of distress and included "being ignored, being excluded, asked questions in intimidating ways, and being given unpleasant tasks resulted in higher levels of general stress" (p. 2). Clearly, while there is less research available on bullying and harassment in professional practice WIL fields beyond nursing, when it does occur the level of distress can be significant.

The research on bullying and harassment attests to the significant influence the field educator, mentor or supervisor often have on student during WIL (Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2018). Davis et al.'s (2020) research on student dignity, which is defined as the outcomes of students feeling respected by others, highlights when students feel valued, included in the workplace, have debriefing opportunities, and their learning needs and wellbeing are considered, their learning is optimised. Conversely, they found dignity violations which focused on verbal abuse, restricted learning opportunities, lack of care, exclusion, unreasonable expectations, limited or inappropriate feedback and students being treated differently from other students, adversely impact on students' learning. Central to the dignity narratives is the student-supervisor relationship, which when supportive can act as a protective factor for students in preventing and addressing stress during WIL (Davis et al., 2020).

Some research explores how students who experienced distress during WIL addressed it including their efforts to access support. In relation to bullying and harassment, Timm (2014) compared the responses of nursing and medical students to bullying and found most medical students did 'nothing' and/or went on to avoid the person they identified as the source of bullying. By contrast, nursing student respondents were more likely to report or challenge those involved in the harassment and most frequently reported de-briefing with their dedicated clinical teacher or other nurses. Minton et al. (2018) found only 27% of nursing student participants who experienced bullying reported it to their tertiary provider. Most were not satisfied with the outcome, uncertain if any action was taken or they felt penalised for reporting. Of those who had not reported the bullying, 40% believed nothing would be done, 41% believed they would be further victimised and 37% did not know how or where to report.

Beddoe et al. (2023) sheds light on the possible factors that deter students from reporting or seeking professional help for distress. Their research on mental health issues for social work students during their study (not only during placement) found the decision to not disclose and/or seek support is linked to stigma and shame, with some students having concerns that if their educators knew it would jeopardise their future and so choose to struggle without assistance so they could complete placement and get their qualification. There is some indication that peer support from classmates acts as protective factors for student's mental health and well-being during WIL (McBeath et al., 2018; Murray et al., 2020; Spiridon et al., 2020). Although in their study of peer support and belonging, McBeath et al. (2018) found WIL, particularly when off-campus, can adversely impact on students' contact with their peer group.

Though previous research has investigated specific forms of distress students face during WIL and the impacts on their wellbeing and mental health, there is still limited research that explores how to effectively prevent and manage these difficulties. With regard to professional practice WIL, bullying and harassment has been explored but research has mainly been conducted with nursing students. There is also a need for more comprehensive research on students' strategies in responding to distress during WIL and to understand the factors that can contribute to improving placements.

RESEARCH METHODS

This article reports findings from the analysis of data collected in the first phase of a mixed method project that received approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC 2022/156) at the University of Canterbury. This initial phase consisted of a national survey and will be followed by a series of individual in-depth interviews with some of the survey participants. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010) have codified mixed methods research designs and suggest that selection involves consideration of the relative emphasis on quantitative or qualitative data, the order of each method of data collection, and the relationship between the forms of data in the analysis phase. In the case of this project, the quantitative and qualitative data will be given equal weight in the ultimate analysis even though the quantitative survey has been undertaken first. The use of individual interviews following the survey provides the opportunity to triangulate the results (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010) and add depth to the quantitative findings through hearing stories that sit behind the responses. In addition, the quantitative results will be used to inform the development of the questions used in the semi structured interviews, thereby providing the opportunity to test the interpretation of the survey data with participants.

Bullying and harassment experienced by nursing students while on placement has previously been investigated in New Zealand by Minton et al. (2018). Their research utilised a national survey that provided a starting point for the development of the present investigation with social work graduates. Questions from the Minton et al. (2018) survey were reviewed to determine their applicability to the context of WIL in social work programmes. A total of 29 questions were developed that included a mixture of Likert scales, selection lists, and free-text responses. The survey included sections enquiring about demographics, frequency and types of distress experienced on placement, the sources of the distress, and the relative impact on the participant. The questions also covered the forms of support and strategies utilised to manage the distress, along with the advice participants accessed and the relative value of decisions about how to respond to the distress. An early draft of the survey was reviewed by an academic from the University of Canterbury, who was experienced in quantitative surveys, and their feedback was incorporated into the final design. It is acknowledged that there is a potential risk for retraumatising participants by asking questions about distress. However, participants self-selected to participate and were free to choose not to complete parts of the survey or withdraw

completely. Given that participants could choose when and where to complete the survey, the risk of retraumatisation was considered to be relatively low.

Participant recruitment was undertaken with the support of three professional associations, the Social Workers Registration Board, and the 18 academic institutions providing social work education in New Zealand. Each partner organisation was provided with project information and sample advertising to send out electronically to their graduate communities. The survey was made available online and could be accessed via a QR code or weblink. Two rounds of advertising were conducted at three-month intervals and the survey was available in total between July and December 2023. Participants self-identified as having experienced distress during one or more of their placement experiences. The survey also provided an opportunity to indicate interest in participating in an individual interview and participants provided an email address for follow-up purposes. Survey responses and expressions of interest in an interview were kept separate to maintain anonymity of survey responses. A total of 98 social work graduates completed the survey and 27 agreed to be interviewed.

Most survey participants identified as female (86% vs 12% male), which reflects statistics reported by academic institutions for social work students (85% female, 14% male) (Social Workers Registration Board [SWRB], 2022). Eighteen percent of participants self-identified as Māori and 2% as Pacific, which is lower than recent student cohorts overall, possibly indicating a lack of engagement from graduates of institutions with high Māori and Pacific populations. The age range of participants was slightly older than recent student cohorts, namely 52% between 25 and 40 and 31% from 41 to 55 years old, but this is likely to be a reflection of the time lapse between enrolment and graduation. Sixty six percent of participants had completed their qualification after 2021, which would mean that they had a placement experience within two years of completing the survey.

Participants were asked to indicate the region where they completed their placement and 40% selected Canterbury, 11% Auckland, and 11% Otago, with the remainder spread across the country. This does not correlate with the profile of placements reported by the SWRB (15% Canterbury, 38% Auckland, 6% Otago) but is likely to reflect the fact that two members of the research team are based in Canterbury and would have promoted the survey with their graduates. Despite the high percentage of participants in Canterbury, this is considered unlikely to significantly impact results because experiences of distress across the country are expected to be closely related and the research is not designed to analyse regional or institutional variance. Eighty six percent of participants indicated that they were employed in a role related to social work, suggesting that any distress they experienced on placement did not impact their future career decisions.

RESULTS

Types of Distress

Participants were provided with a list of 28 different types of distress and were able to choose as many of these that related to their situation on placement. The results were then grouped into two categories: distress associated with the workplace and distress of a personal or interpersonal nature (Table 1). Difficult workplace interactions were the most common type of distress with nearly half of participants indicating they had experienced this situation on their placement. Financial hardship was also cited as a significant type of distress for over 40% of the participants. This was followed by nearly 40% of participants feeling unsupported, out of their depth or having unfair expectations placed on them. Notably, about a quarter of the participants had experienced verbal threats or other types of abuse or harassment, and a third noted mental health distress due to their placement situation.

TABLE 1: Types of distress.

Items	N (%)
Personal / interpersonal distress	
Financial hardship	41 (41.8)
Mental health distress	31 (31.6)
Verbally threatened, harassed, intimidated, condescended or abused	25 (25.5)
Traumatic event(s)	17 (17.3)
Family disruption	14 (14.3)
Non-verbally threatened, harassed, intimidated, condescended, or abused	10 (10.2)
Workplace distress	
Difficult workplace interactions	47 (48.0)
Unsupported, out of my depth, or unfair expectations of me	39 (39.8)
Exclusion, deliberate neglect, or deliberate withholding of information	19 (19.4)
Lack of provision for my specific needs	18 (18.4)
Deliberate denial of learning opportunities or acknowledgment of good work	16 (16.3)
Under scrutiny or surveillance (that led to distress)	15 (15.3)
Intentionally unfair assessment by supervisor or unfair criticism or blame	15 (15.3)

Impacts of Distress

The participants were asked to identify, from a list of 22 items, how their experience(s) of distress on placement had materially impacted them. Able to select more than one element, the results indicated the impacts of the distress were primarily related to the participants' emotional and physical selves. These negative impacts included over 40% of participants feeling anxious, stressed, and tearful, and many participants feeling their confidence was undermined and inadequate (38.8%). A range of other negative impacts affected their emotions, sleep patterns and ability to engage effectively in their placement experience. The impacts of distress also affected some participants' attitude towards certain social work organisations or fields of practice, whether they wished to remain in the profession, and their academic performance during the placement.

TABLE 2: Material impacts of distress.

Items	N (%)
Affected them emotionally and physically	
I felt anxious, stressed, tearful, or experienced panic attacks	42 (42.9)
I felt inadequate, unsure of myself, a reduction in confidence, or negative self-talk	38 (38.8)
It noticeably impacted my physical or mental health	31 (31.6)
I felt confused	27 (27.6)
I felt embarrassed, humiliated or ashamed	26 (26.5)
I experienced sleep disruption or insomnia	25 (25.5)
I experienced reduced initiative or a fear of failure	23 (23.5)
I felt angry, irritable or defensive	19 (19.4)
I felt depressed, numb, and/or withdrawn	15 (15.3)
Affected their experience of study, placement and the profession	
I have avoided certain areas of social work/certain institutions	21 (21.4)
I considered changing course or leaving social work entirely	20 (20.4)
It negatively impacted my academic performance	18 (18.4)
It made me take time off field education/call in absent	13 (13.3)

Support Received and Strategies for Managing Distress

The results indicated students had mixed experiences of support with a small number receiving no support at all. Family and friends provided the most extensive support with workplace staff, including the primary field educator or mentor and colleagues, offering considerable support. Less than a quarter of the participants received support from their educational institution.

TABLE 3: Support received.

Items	N (%)
Informal support from friends and/or family	52 (53.1)
Support from field educator/mentor at field education agency	30 (30.6)
Support from colleagues at field education agency	26 (26.5)
Support from tertiary institution	23 (23.5)
Support from external field educator/supervisor	16 (16.3)
Personal counselling/therapy/mental health support	15 (15.3)
No support received/sought	10 (10.2)
Medical support	7 (7.1)
Other	5 (5.1)
Support from manager at field education agency	4 (4.1)
Spiritual support	3 (3.1)

Participants were also invited to consider 18 strategies that they may have used to support themselves after the distressing situation. These related to seeking support from others, including from personal networks and the university; individual personal strategies; and strategies related to the course itself.

The results were categorised into personal wellbeing strategies, support strategies, and strategies associated with changing their study circumstances (Table 4). The most utilised strategies related to support, and primarily informal support from friends and family (52%) followed by their peers (29.6%), and formal supervision (27.6%). After rating the strategies as most to least useful, talking to friends and family was identified as the most useful strategy (25%) in supporting the participants after the distressing situation.

Journaling or critical reflection are common tools that are taught to students prior to beginning placement, with some HEIs also requiring students to engage in these strategies throughout their placement experience. Some participants also noted this as a helpful strategy following a distressing experience. Overall, the personal wellbeing strategies utilized by the participants were associated with positive actions, rather than activities that may impact them negatively such as increasing alcohol or other substance use (3%).

TABLE 4: Strategies for managing distress.

Items	N (%)
Personal wellbeing strategies	
Journaling or critical reflection	27 (27.6)
Mindfulness or meditation	19 (19.4)
Increased or changes in food intake	15 (15.3)
Increased my exercise	15 (15.3)
Physical care approaches	14 (14.3)
Took some sick leave	13 (13.3)
Breathing techniques	13 (13.3)
Support strategies	
Talking to friends or family	51 (52.0)
Peer supervision	29 (29.6)
Supervision	27 (27.6)
Seeking support from field education staff at tertiary institution	21 (21.4)
Counselling	14 (14.3)
Seeking support from staff at tertiary institution	14 (14.3)
Other	10 (10.2)

The survey results indicate that WIL staff were not a preferred means of support for many of the participants, despite these people being closely involved with the organization, monitoring and assessment of the WIL courses. The results instead highlight that students preferred to seek support from family and friends, and their colleagues in the WIL work places, inferring these were the people they could most trust to receive the support they required following a distressing incident.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of WIL is to enable students to engage in meaningful learning experiences in workplaces so that their understanding and application of disciplinary theoretical knowledge and skills is enhanced. It is not intended to negatively impact on them and, in fact, in New Zealand, legislation requires HEI to ensure student wellbeing and safety throughout their enrolment in their qualifying programmes (New Zealand Government, 2021). Encountering situations that create distress and tension is an unintended consequence of WIL, and one that HEI have a duty of care to mitigate and manage. An expanding body of research highlights that several types of distress may be associated with WIL including financial hardship, bullying, harassment, exploitation, and unsatisfactory learning experiences (Bartley et al., 2024; Gharibi, 2018; Grant-Smith et al., 2018; Minton et al., 2018; Usher et al., 2021). The participants in this research endorsed these negative elements of WIL indicating that workplace interactions and financial hardship were particularly impactful.

Students do have agency in their responses to distressing situations during WIL. The research emphasized that family and friends are the primary support strategy after a distressing situation during WIL, and this may be particularly true for students from Indigenous or other collective cultures (Hay & Mafile'o, 2022; Mooney et al., 2020). The support of family and friends support may, however, be limited due to their restricted understanding of the WIL workplace, course requirements, or other available avenues of support. Involvement of family in higher education is limited in New Zealand but would be a valuable strategy especially in the context of WIL (Mooney et al., 2020). Engaging with family would assist with enhancing understanding of what WIL is, the expectations of their family member during the WIL course, how to support them, and avenues in the HEI where they or their student family member could seek support, if desired.

Supervision, both from peers and professional supervisors, are common strategies for supporting WIL students (Winchester-Seeto et al., 2021), and this was corroborated in our research. Group supervision during WIL can be an effective strategy to provide support for students who are dealing with challenging workplace interactions. Although individual supervision is the most common approach used in social work WIL, group models have also been employed for many years, sometimes as an additional form of support (Bogo et al., 2004). Some researchers have found high levels of student dissatisfaction with external supervision (Cleak & Smith, 2012), but this appears to be when the student does not have an onsite social worker to provide guidance. When offered as an additional form of support, group supervision may provide a space to share common problems, address anxieties, receive emotional support, and develop self-efficacy to address challenging situations (Alshuler et al., 2015). Group supervision can also be structured to focus on particular cohorts of students, for example, Kaupapa Māori supervision, wherein Māori (Indigenous) students gather for supervision with an Indigenous supervisor. In these spaces students can feel culturally safe, share concerns, and learn from their supervisor and peers. Successful group supervision requires high levels of trust and skilled supervisors who can effectively manage the complexities of the group process (Bogo et al., 2004). However, if done well, it may provide students with a community they can turn to who are likely to have a deeper understanding about how to address distressing situations than friends or family. Further research is required to investigate whether group supervision may help to ameliorate distress during WIL.

A further, though less preferred, response to the distressing situation was for students to access WIL staff from their education programme. Institutional support is a critical component of addressing student wellbeing during WIL (Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2018). It is important that staff involved

in supporting students during WIL adopt a proactive approach. This might begin with highlighting to students the risk of distress during WIL and providing guidance about sources of help, thereby equipping students to effectively navigate challenges if they arise. Frequent engagement with the student during the placement may also help academic staff to identify problems at an early stage and address the issues at a lower level than if left until the student requests help themselves. An existing trusting relationship with the student may facilitate student decision-making in accessing WIL staff when a distressing situation arises, suggesting that this rapport should be developed prior to the WIL experience. Spending time getting to know the student in advance of the placement is an important investment considering the potential need to address issues of distress at a later stage. Clarity of the role of the WIL staff during a placement, their accessibility, and their responsibility to support student wellbeing and safety may improve the current indicator that students do not immediately seek their support.

While HEI in New Zealand are now tasked with ensuring the wellbeing and safety of their students, there are several structural barriers to overcome. Academic staff involved in managing WIL not only have a responsibility to support students but are well positioned to engage with both the student and the workplace to mediate any challenges. However, addressing issues with a host agency when a student reports distress may well require a challenging conversation. Unfortunately, unsatisfactory resourcing models means that many disciplines are reliant on the goodwill of organizations to provide placements, and individual practitioners to act as mentors. This can disincentivise the HEI from robustly challenging poor workplace interactions with students. A more preventive approach to pastoral care might be for HEI to set benchmarks for host organisations, including training standards for teams and practitioners supporting students. Unfortunately, the dominant 'begging bowl' model of accessing placements stifles this possibility.

The significant number of participant experiences of feeling unsupported or out of the scope of their capability suggests that some workplaces may not understand how to best support and scaffold student learning, may not prioritize WIL, or may have limited capacity as student educators. WIL is often cited as a forum for workforce development or enhancing employability of future graduates (Jackson & Cook, 2023; Smith et al., 2021), however the training of WIL supervisors, especially as educators and assessors of students, has received little attention or resourcing, both in the social work profession, and in other professional or vocational disciplines (Chilvers, 2017). This suggests there is a need to consider the development of an HEI workplace training and professional development strategy so that host organizations view themselves as training providers and the professionals mentoring students view themselves as educators. If workplaces adopted a stance as a learning environment, then this would shift the perspective away from students simply completing work tasks. A learning culture in the WIL workplace will recognise the vulnerability of the student and reduce unreasonable expectations from colleagues. This kind of cultural shift is unlikely until workplaces value WIL sufficiently to link student mentoring to professional development and career pathways for practitioners.

The negative impacts of financial hardship due mainly to unpaid placements in professions traditionally associated with women, have received considerable recent attention (Bartley et al., 2024; Hodge et al., 2021; Johnstone et al., 2016), and, moreover, led to legislative change in Australia (Duffy, 2024; Ellingham, 2024). Examples of students accessing foodbanks, living in cars or couch surfing, or experiencing other forms of hardship are prevalent and, in New Zealand, have recently been highlighted in a student-led campaign for paid placements (Ryan, 2024). The results from this research are opportune and add to the growing momentum for significant policy change at government level so that student hardship, especially during WIL experiences, can be adequately addressed.

This research provides useful insight into student experiences of distress during WIL, but several limitations are acknowledged. Firstly, the survey was completed by a relatively small sample from a single profession. However, it does confirm findings from similar research in other professions. Secondly, although the survey was made available across New Zealand, the Canterbury region was overrepresented. Thirdly, the title of the research may have attracted participants who wanted to share experiences of particular forms of distress and results may not reflect the true range of experience. Fourthly, the current study made use of existing literature to identify factors that contributed to distress, to compose the survey, which provides a level of transferability and generalisability for the results to be checked against existing research. However, a limitation is that participants were asked about whether they have experienced the type of distress using dichotomous responses, rather than Likert-scale to examine the extent of the experiences. This has prevented the scales to be tested for reliability. Future research could make use Likert-scales to increase variability in responses and provide more opportunity to test for reliability. Despite these factors, the descriptions of forms of student distress, responses, and support strategies provide valuable information for HEI and organisations involved in facilitating WIL.

CONCLUSION

This paper sheds light on the pressing issue of distress experienced by students during WIL in New Zealand, thereby emphasising the urgent need for proactive measures to safeguard student wellbeing. The findings underscore the multifaceted nature of distress, encompassing psychological, social, and financial dimensions, resonating with other WIL literature, which highlights the prevalence of distress and its detrimental impacts on students. Further, our research indicates that while students do exhibit agency in responding to distressing situations, many turn to family and friends as the primary sources of support. While these people are important resources for students, as informal supports they are unlikely to understand the complexities of WIL and the avenues for assistance within HEI. An important future strategy to support WIL students is for HEI to proactively engage with families so they are better equipped to support their student family members. How this strategic approach to supporting the wellbeing of students can be incorporated in current systems and processes requires further consideration by WIL staff, students, and family members.

It is incumbent upon HEI to bolster support mechanisms and address the systemic factors that perpetuate distress during WIL, including inadequate payment for placements, resourcing and insufficient support for students and supervisors. The research highlights the pivotal role of HEI in ensuring the safety and wellbeing of students throughout WIL. In New Zealand with legislative frameworks such as the Pastoral Care Code of Practice in place, there exists a clear mandate for HEI to prioritise student wellbeing. So too, host organizations play important roles in preventing and responding to distress. To facilitate this, as our research underscores, there is a need for enhanced training and resourcing for WIL field educators and supervisors, who play a central role in guiding students through their placement experiences. The lack of attention in this area not only undermines the quality of student learning but also perpetuates an environment where stressors may go unchecked.

In the next qualitative phase of this research, we will build upon the quantitative findings presented in this paper, to explore nuanced understandings of students' lived experiences and coping mechanisms during WIL. By delving deeper into the experiences of social work students, the subsequent phase aims to illuminate the intricacies of distress within WIL contexts. It will also offer a platform for students to voice their perspectives and contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding student wellbeing in WIL.

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About the Journal

The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning (IJWIL) publishes double-blind peer-reviewed original research and topical issues related to Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). IJWIL first published in 2000 under the name of Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education (APJCE).

In this Journal, WIL is defined 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*).

Examples of practice include off-campus workplace immersion activities such as work placements, internships, practicum, service learning, and cooperative education (co-op), and on-campus activities such as work-related projects/competitions, entrepreneurships, student-led enterprise, student consultancies, etc. WIL is related to, and overlaps with, the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training.

The Journal's aim is to enable specialists working in WIL to disseminate research findings and share knowledge to the benefit of institutions, students, WIL practitioners, curricular designers, and researchers. The Journal encourages quality research and explorative critical discussion that leads to the advancement of quality practices, development of further understanding of WIL, and promote further research.

The Journal is financially supported by the Work-Integrated Learning New Zealand (WILNZ; www.wilnz.nz), and the University of Waikato, New Zealand.

Types of Manuscripts Sought by the Journal

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

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

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

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

By negotiation with the Editor-in-Chief, the Journal also accepts a small number of *Book Reviews* of relevant and recently published books.

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International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning

ISSN: 2538-1032

www.ijwil.org