

Work Integrated Learning (WIL): Designing and Implementing WIL Curricula

Context and motivation for promoting WIL in curricula

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is learning that results from an integration of workplace experience and disciplinary knowledge and practice. The phrase work-integrated learning is also used to describe curricula designed to bring about this kind of integrative learning. Integrative learning is learning that integrates the acquisition of disciplinary content and skills with their application in appropriate workplaces through a dialectic process in which the immediate experiences in the workplace are interpreted through the lens of codified disciplinary knowledge and disciplinary knowledge is re-interpreted in light of experience.

The inclusion of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) curricula in university programs is becoming increasingly common in the higher education sector (Abeysekera, 2006, Barnett et al., 2001, Smith et al., 2006) in Australia and other parts of the world. Increasingly, higher education providers are under pressure to produce more “employable”, or “work-ready” graduates, whose skills are a good match for what employers are seeking in employees. Work-integrated learning is one way in which university curricula can be adapted so that there is a better “fit” between graduates and the kinds of work they go on to seek. Griffith University’s commitments to positive graduate outcomes, global citizenship and community engagement add extra dimensions to the importance of WIL as a process of reciprocal involvement that benefits students, industry and the community.

Strategies for success in the design and implementation of effective WIL curricula

1. Use student placements in authentic professional contexts as learning environments in which students engage in meaningful and consequential workplace activities that are designed to achieve enhanced and integrative learning.
2. Ensure that students are required to focus on the integration of theoretical knowledge and practice that allows them to connect university or disciplinary learning with workplace application by:
 - designing learning activities that require the integration of disciplinary and workplace-relevant knowledge and skills deployed in the workplace;
 - bringing professional practice to the core of WIL curricula to act as the organiser for both disciplinary (theoretical) and practical learning; and
 - recognising that workplace practice that may be erroneous or out of step with theoretical knowledge can be used as a catalyst for integrative learning.

Interpretation of and reflection on the experience of professional practice and application of knowledge in context should be at the heart of learning experiences for students in WIL curricula.
3. Integrate, as appropriate, the range of supports (e.g. learning advisors, counselling) provided by the university as well as those provided to staff in workplaces by:
 - making available to WIL students the university’s learning supports, information and communication technology services, counselling services and other ancillary supports while they are on placement, as an integral part of the curriculum design; and
 - integrating a range of services provided by workplaces including the workplace’s OH&S services, safety and procedural inductions for new staff, psychological counselling services and staff development resources (e.g. libraries).

4. Ensure alignment of learning objectives, workplace activities and assessment (Biggs, 1996) to produce effective, relevant, meaningful and intended outcomes for all stakeholders, especially students. Students' workplace experiences ought to afford the development of what is to be learned and what is to be assessed by:
 - ensuring that stakeholders, both students and industry partners, have agreed on the learning objectives and learning activities of the WIL curricula;
 - using a learning plan or learning contract to document negotiated agreements on learning outcomes and processes;
 - coordinating with workplace supervisors and monitoring students' workplace activities to ensure that they remain consistent with the learning objectives and assessments of the course or program; and
 - building the assessment around and focussing the assessment on (*inter alia*):
 - disciplinary knowledge and its application learned during placement;
 - critical reflection on applicability of theories and canonical knowledge to practice; and
 - self-reflection on the meaning and relevance of the experience and what was learned.
5. Efficiently manage and effectively monitor students' progress during placement by:
 - communicating regularly with students and industry partners;
 - visiting students and meeting with workplace supervisors at the workplace. This:
 - provides much needed support, especially for students who are having difficulties;
 - catches problems early before they become a significant threat to students' progress, success or safety; and
 - promotes closer professional relationship with industry partners (Clapton et al., 2007);
 - meeting with students to discuss and share reflective journals and experiences (Bates, 2008); and
 - requiring students to submit three to four 'milestone' or progress reports (Industrial Affiliates Program, 2008) for a one-semester placement duration.
6. Effectively administer aspects of the curriculum that indirectly support students' learning such as:
 - establishing, maintaining and troubleshooting relationships with industry partners;
 - keeping placement records;
 - maintaining contact with students and workplace supervisors; and
 - assessing and addressing risk and other matters such as OH&S and ethical issues related to placements.
7. Balance the key elements that comprise an effective WIL placement as follows :
 - establish minimum administrative standards to ensure there is no risk of compromise to the placement (e.g. by OHS risk, illegality or failure to comply with statutory standards, acts of commission or omission that would damage relationships with industry partners) or to the University;
 - ensure that budget and resources are sufficient to cover the financial and logistical support necessary to administer the program to the minimum standards;
 - ensure the quality of the WIL curriculum i.e. the effectiveness of the curriculum for bringing about engagement and learning, and ensuring students' satisfaction with the experience; and
 - adopt a risk management strategy that anticipates likely contingencies and builds in administrative responses to capture and manage eventualities.

For additional resources on WIL in the Curriculum visit the WIL professional development website at <http://www.griffith.edu.au/gihe/learning-teaching-resources/work-integrated-learning>

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