

Reproducing Inequalities through Work Integrated Learning

CONTEXT

Work integrated learning (WIL), an “umbrella term used for a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum” includes experiences such as internships, field experience, placement, practicum etc. (Patrick et al., 2009). An increasing focus of public debate, government policy and university practices, it has become a key component in Australian higher education, as evidenced by the open-ended national strategy to increase the prevalence of WIL in Australia (Universities Australia, ACCI, AiGroup, Business Council of Australia, & ACEN, 2015). The increasing prevalence of WIL in Australia is a response to the demand for ‘job-ready’ graduates and is reflective of a larger international trend in higher education.

WIL is designed to provide students with opportunities to increase their ‘employability’ through a variety of means including gaining real-world experience, building their professional identity and establishing/increasing professional networks. The increase in higher education participation and the current volatile employment market mean that WIL experiences can have a significant impact on a student’s employability, often serving as a ‘differentiator’ for employers (Brown & Souto-Otero, 2018).

SUPPLY VS. DEMAND

The increase in WIL demand across Australia has not been accompanied by the same growth for placement availability. The shortage of placements has led to the development of ‘innovative’ WIL models. These models include learning experiences such as projects based on campus, virtual project work etc. These models were designed to ensure that all students in a cohort have access to a WIL experience and are almost exclusively the domain of students from under-represented backgrounds who are ‘hard to place’ (Mackaway, Winchester-Seeto, & Carter, 2014). The quality (and perceived quality) of these experiences becomes increasingly important when full cohorts are graduating with a WIL experience. The short supply of placements means that in a cohort, the ‘high-achieving’ students with the cultural capital to ‘survive’ in a workplace are given the ‘preferable’ embedded placements where they can build their social and network capital, while their peers are given experiences working on a real world problem, but at a distance. Such models may be ‘inclusive’ by making WIL ‘accessible’, but fail to address that they are merely reproducing the existing privileges and inequalities of the cohort.

AUSTRALIAN WORKPLACES ARE DEEPLY INEQUITABLE

An overabundance of students means that Australian employers are increasingly driving the criteria for which students they will accept on placements, therefore determining a student’s access and participation within higher education. These ‘recruitment’ strategies are reflective of company hiring strategies, reproducing the makeup of the current workforce. The evidence of inequality in Australian workplaces is overwhelming and generally shows little difference between the private and public work sectors. For example, the labour force participation rate for people with disability was 52.8%, compared with 82.5% for people without disability, a figure that has changed very little over the past 20 years (ABS, 2012). Looking at employment and income rates only tells part of the story, as the figures do not show the prevalence of other workplace disadvantage for those already in the workplace (e.g. underemployment, harassment and discrimination etc.) and fail to take into consideration any intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). Even in the emerging workforce of the innovation/entrepreneurs space (an increasing focus of Government and University policy and funding), only 2% of venture capital funds are awarded to women (Zarya, 2017). It’s important to note that the above discrepancies and inequalities exist in the Australian workforce when employees are protected by anti-discrimination legislation, unions etc. but **students on placement do not have these same protections** (Hewitt, Owens, & Stewart, 2018). Despite these risks, *‘there is no systematic approach nor agreed set of principals about how to develop genuinely inclusive WIL’* (Winchester-Seeto et al., 2015). In Australia, management of these risks is seen as the responsibility of the university and are handled on an institutional basis.

THE SILENT PRACTITIONERS

The increasing prominence of WIL in Australia has been accompanied by an emerging variety of WIL research, particularly focusing on the theory and pedagogy of WIL, the benefits and ‘good practice’ examples (for example: Billett, 2011). Work addressing inequalities with WIL has focused on making WIL ‘inclusive’ and does not address deeper inequalities nor how they are reproduced through WIL (Winchester-Seeto et al., 2015). This work has also been produced by Academics who are largely removed from the day to day practice of implementing WIL, particularly the process of allocating a cohort with diverse needs. As in other areas of higher education research, a breach has formed between researchers and policy makers involved in WIL and practitioners who administer these placements.

Professional WIL staff are uniquely placed to add their voices to the conversation of WIL in Australia as they are exposed to the everyday impact these policies have on students. WIL practitioners see first-hand that equity considerations are some of the first to be compromised in an environment of competing stakeholder priorities; an environment which favours the placation of placement providers to ensure future opportunities. The project will explore these issues from the lens of a practitioner, highlighting the missing voices in current research and tries to bridge the gap between policy and practice.

References:

- Billett, S. (2011). *Guidelines for practice: Integrating practice-based experiences*. Strawberry Hills: Australian Learning & Teaching Council.
- Brown, P., & Souto-Otero, M. (2018). The end of the credential society? An analysis of the relationship between education and the labour market using big data. *Journal of Education Policy*, 1-24. doi:10.1080/02680939.2018.1549752
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241. doi:10.2307/1229039
- Hewitt, A., Owens, R., & Stewart, A. (2018). Mind the gap: Is the regulation of work-integrated learning in higher education working? *Monash University Law Review*, 44(1), 234-266.
- Mackaway, J., Winchester-Seeto, T., & Carter, L. (2014, 7/07/14 → 10/07/14). *Work-integrated learning and the ‘inclusive’ challenge of preparing a diverse student cohort for the world beyond the academy*. Paper presented at the HERDSA Annual International Conference (37th : 2014) Hong Kong.
- Patrick, C.-j., Peach, D., Pocknee, C., Webb, F., Fletcher, M., & Pretto, G. (2009). *The WIL (Work Integrated Learning) report: A national scoping study*. Brisbane: Queensland University of Technology
- Universities Australia, ACCI, AiGroup, Business Council of Australia, & ACEN. (2015). National Strategy on Work Integrated Learning in university education. In (pp. <http://acen.edu.au/resources/national-wil-strategy/>).
- Winchester-Seeto, T., Mackaway, J., Peach, D., Moore, K., Ferns, S., & Campbell, M. (2015). Principles, Guidelines and Strategies for Inclusive WIL. In. Brisbane.
- Zarya, V. (2017). Venture Capital's Funding Gender Gap is Actually Getting Worse. Retrieved from <http://fortune.com/2017/03/13/female-founders-venture-capital/>

This poster was produced as part of the 2018 Writing Program for Equity & Widening Participation Practitioners developed by the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education at the University of Newcastle. Funding for the program was provided by the Commonwealth Governments Higher Education Participation & Partnership Program

HOW CAN
UNIVERSITIES
PRODUCE EQUITABLE
WIL MODELS IF THEY
CANNOT PRODUCE
EQUITY FOR THEIR
STAFF RESPONSIBLE
FOR WIL?

Universities as workplaces are not immune to the inequalities persistent in the Australian workforce. Research shows that both professional and academic university staff working in the WIL space are subject to various inequities as a direct result of this involvement (Jovanovic et al, 2018; Patrick et al, 2009; Wheeldon & Cooley 2018).