



Work integrated learning enhances graduate capabilities, employment and career opportunities

The challenge

The University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) strategic plan 2016-2020¹ focuses on the university as a capacity builder, and this aspiration includes a specific focus on its regional communities. In this regard, one of the educational strategies USC seeks to use is work-integrated learning (WIL). At USC WIL is offered as part of the curricula for 43 disciplines across both its faculties. WIL experiences can be broadly identified in two groups: first, those that are part of highly structured learning requirements in externally accredited programs, organised as an iterative, scaffolded curriculum, for example Nursing and Education; and second, those that are required or elective courses in undergraduate programs, which incorporate a broad range of stand-alone internships, special projects, study overseas programs and other opportunities for work integrated learning. Four different types of this second group of WIL activities (not externally accredited) were investigated for this case study: Law WIL, entrepreneurship WIL, drama internship and tourism WIL.

All these initiatives are established and embedded components of course curricula in Bachelors of Laws, Arts, Serious Games, Creative Industries, and Business.

Thirteen undergraduate students who were currently enrolled in or had undertaken the WIL course in the previous 2-3 offerings, and 8 academic staff with experience in development and/or delivery of each of the courses participated in the interviews.

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The findings support WIL as an authentic educational experience that supports the development of transferable knowledge and skills for lifelong learning, employment and career development.

Key findings

The data analysed for this case study revealed two key themes: Learning Work which captured and described students' experiences into three subthemes: crafting and practising; applying, innovating and experimenting; and developing

¹ <http://www.usc.edu.au/explore/vision/strategy-quality-and-planning/strategic-plan-2016-2020>

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generic competencies. The second theme Learning Accomplishment focused on the influence of WIL on students' further learning and direction, and included three subthemes: changing perspectives, confidence and identity, and future focus.

Practising and crafting. The benefits of learning everyday work processes or procedures within a specific practice context positively impacted on motivation and built skills related to work practices.

I think specific skills they get taught by their mentors during their placement, which is hugely important because we don't always teach those skills at all here.

(Staff)

Applying, innovating and experimenting. WIL activities assisted the application of theory to practice and there was evidence students had increased agency over their learning.

So you actually get to put all of this stuff that's just been floating around in your head that you've learnt into practice and be like, 'I remember that time we learnt about that thing' and then you can go and look it up.

(Student)

Developing generic competencies. WIL activities developed generic skills.

I've always been a sole trader in my life ... usually I'm a team leader, but how to approach work as a team member is different.

(Student)

Changing perspective. The most common perspective shift was from self to a more multi-focal lens.

But it's actually more than that it's cementing your knowledge but then also opening your mind to other people's perspectives and not just having a one-sided view, so multi perspectives I guess.

(Student)

Confidence and identity. The immersion experiences were related to personal growth, increased confidence and an increased understanding of self or identity.

I've learned a lot out of it about myself and that this, I want to pursue this as my career... So it gives you confidence that you can do it, and areas to improve and that type of thing.

(Student)

Future focus. The data described ways in which WIL might influence students' futures, create new possibilities and build networks.

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(Student)

WIL shapes the student experience

This case showed evidence that WIL impacts on students' personal growth. There was evidence of both short and longer term impacts associated with the WIL experience, an appreciation of local community and insight into the breadth of possibilities for a student's own direction as a practising professional.

Implications for practice

Project and group based WIL provide opportunities for students to apply knowledge, to develop solutions and identify innovative practices.

Internship and individual WIL assist students to practise context-specific work activities and to hone the skills particularly required for specific practice situations.

Conclusion

WIL initiatives that engage students with each other, and with local businesses and industries, to practice skills, develop, apply and adapt knowledge, to innovate and experiment are positively associated with student engagement and the positive consequences of engagement. This case study found that WIL contributed to identity development and personal growth. There was evidence that when WIL provides an authentic educational experience, it supports the development of transferable knowledge and develops skills for lifelong learning, employment and career development.