Work-integrated learning and the ‘inclusive’ challenge of preparing a diverse student cohort for the world beyond the academy

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A “wicked problem” for work-integrated learning (WIL) – the story about reputational risk...

- The student...
- The WIL partner...
- The academic...
- The options...
  a. place the student
  b. keep close on campus
  c. redesign the whole unit
  d. ?

*This is a common story in WIL*...
Aim of study

• to better understand which students are potentially disadvantaged by WIL
  – (specifically the placement model of WIL)

• how disadvantage is experienced by the involved stakeholders (students, host supervisors, academics and professional staff)

• what can be done to enable better student access and participation in WIL.

* Placement WIL = “single student in single workplace”
**Backdrop**

- “Knowledge economy” = need more graduates
- Widening participation in higher education
- Work ready and world ready graduates
- Work-integrated learning (WIL) can help prepare graduates for the world beyond the academy

**Challenge** – not all students can access and fully participate in the placement model of WIL

*Placement WIL = “single student in single workplace”*
Previous research finding: 2 groups of “difficult to place” students identified

“Invisible” students:
- Low SES
- Mental health issues
- Criminal record
- Shy
- Financial restrictions
- Low GPA
- “Alternate” students
- Time restrictions – employed and/or with carer responsibilities
- Low confidence
...and more

“Visible” students:
- International
- Indigenous
- Disabled (disclosed)
Methods

Combination of semi-structured phone & f2f interviews (MQ) plus focus groups (students only)

- students (n=9)
- host supervisors (n=16)
- academics and professional staff (n=9)

Transcripts coded using:

a) research questions to generate high level categories (inductive)

b) thematic sub-categories were generated from data (deductive)
So which students are potentially disadvantaged?

**Main findings:**

- ‘Visible’ and ‘invisible’ students – reconfirmed
- International students – highlighted…*but…*
- Student centred factors – dominated

- “A lot of students work and have full time jobs. It’s very hard for them to actually find time…” (host/workplace supervisor)

- “Some students don’t have the family background or some kind of connection and find it really, really hard to break in and get [law] internships” (academic)

- “There are opportunities for people who are hungry…there are just some students who lack initiative in pursuing things…it depends on their goals and it depends on their passion” (student)
## Main findings:

### Student centred factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Examples from study</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal circumstances</strong></td>
<td>• international students and/or students who have English as a second language</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• students who work and have time/financial limitations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• students from culturally or religiously diverse backgrounds</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• rural students or those studying in distance mode</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• students with a disability, including mental health</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• gay students</td>
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<td><strong>Personal attributes and/or skills</strong></td>
<td>• students who do not have good or highly developed communication skills</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• students who lack motivation or are unclear about their goals</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• students who are not ‘open’ to the experience</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• students who are nervous, shy or lack confidence</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• students who struggle with complex work</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• students with low GPAs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• students who have a learning disability</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• students with poor or underdeveloped interpersonal skills</td>
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<td><strong>Lack of experience with the world of work</strong></td>
<td>• students who do not have a network or contacts that could help them self-place</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• students with none, or limited, prior work experience</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• students who are not familiar or experienced with internships or the ‘job seeking’</td>
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<td></td>
<td>process</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>• students who lack ‘cultural capital’ in relation to the Australian work context.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How is disadvantage experienced by students?

Main findings

1. **No WIL placement**
   - partner unwillingness
   - operational barriers
   - student centred factors i.e., shy; lack of networks and/or experience

2. **Limited WIL options or choices** (i.e., students with a disability)
   - on-campus placements or limited to large employers

3. **Unable to fully participate in the placement**
   - time poor; health related issues; cultural restrictions; etc
How is disadvantage experienced by academics and professional staff?

**Main finding**

Work harder to meet student needs:
- Careful matching
- Pastoral care
- Close monitoring
- Guidance/support
How is disadvantage experienced by host supervisors?

**Main finding**

Work harder to accommodate student needs:

- project/activity design
- guidance/support

*But dependant on:*

- time
- resources
- available technology

• Skills and attitudes of supervisors also a factor here (Nash et al., 2011; Harris et al., 2010; Spencer, 2007)
**Main finding:** university staff and host supervisors use a range of strategies to meet needs of a diverse cohort...

- A flexible approach
- On-campus placements
- Matching students to workplace supervisors and projects/activities
- Modifying projects
- Group placements
- Virtual placements
- Non-placement WIL
Some ‘wicked problems’...

- Perceived risks to reputation
- Perception of placement as the ‘gold standard’ for WIL
- Student needs are complex – ie. specific needs don’t pertain to specific groups of students
- No one way to view and/or solve issues of inclusive WIL
The extent to which unis can prepare students for the world beyond is unknown, but we do know….

To meet the needs of a diverse student cohort…

- a flexible approach is helpful
- working closely with host /workplace supervisors is necessary
- preparation of students for WIL is vital
Thank you…

any questions or comment?
For more information on inclusive WIL contact…

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References


