

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

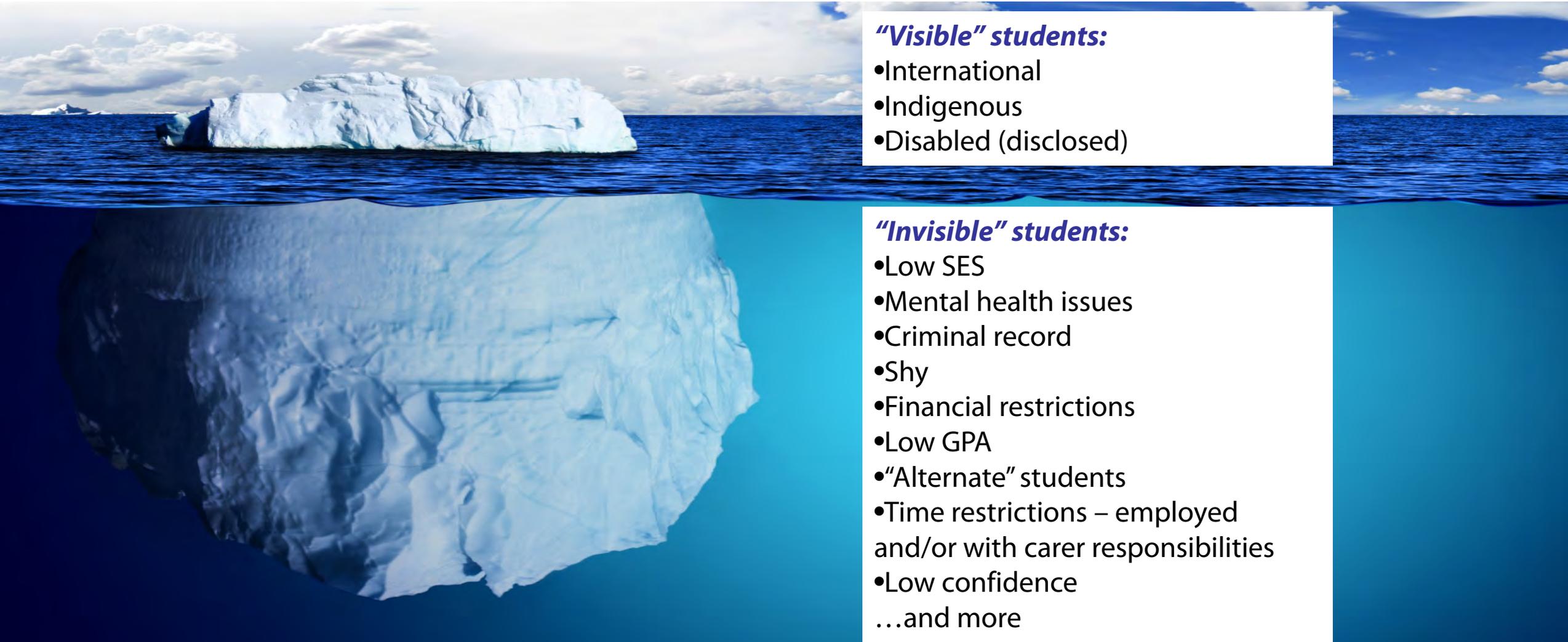
- ➔ “Knowledge economy” = need more graduates
- ➔ Widening participation in higher education
- ➔ Work ready and world ready graduates
- ➔ Work-integrated learning (WIL) can help prepare graduates for the world beyond the academy

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



“Visible” students:

- International
- Indigenous
- Disabled (disclosed)

“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

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)*

Participant quotes...



Main findings:

Student centred factors

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



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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