# WORK INTEGRATED LEARNING: AN INDUSTRY PARTNERS' PERSPECTIVE

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## Abstract

In recent years the Australian tertiary education sector may be said to be undergoing a vocational transformation. Vocationalism, that is, an emphasis on learning directed at work related outcomes is increasingly shaping the nature of tertiary education. This paper reports some findings to date of a project that seeks to identify the key issues faced by students, industry and university partners engaged in the provision of WIL within an undergraduate program offered by the Creative Industries faculty of a major metropolitan university. Here, those findings are focussed on some of the motivations and concerns of the industry partners who make their workplaces available for student internships. Businesses are not universities and do not perceive of themselves as primarily learning institutions. However, their perspectives of work integrated learning and their contributions to it need to understand more fully at practical and conceptual levels of learning provision. This paper and the findings presented here suggest that the diversity of industry partner motivations and concerns contributing to WIL provision requires that universities understand and appreciate those partners as contributors with them to a culture of learning provision and support. These industry partner contribution need to be understood as valuing work as learning, not work as something that needs to be integrated with learning to make that learning more authentic and thereby more vocational.

## Introduction

In recent years the Australian tertiary education sector may be said to be undergoing a vocational transformation. Vocationalism, that is, an emphasis on learning directed at work related outcomes is increasingly shaping the nature of tertiary education. This has been evident in the disappearance of university programs within the humanities disciplines that do not lend themselves to easy entry into the labour market and the rise of programs with a stronger emphasis on securing work ready qualifications. It has also been evident in the renewed emphasis on the provision of work based vocational learning within programs that in the past have not utilised this form of learning. Where teachers and nurses have seemingly always been required to undertake some form of practical work place experience, now also are undergraduate arts students, business students and law students required to undertake some form of what has been termed 'work integrated learning' (WIL).

This paper reports findings to date of a project that sought to identify the key issues faced by industry partners engaged in the provision of WIL within an undergraduate program offered by the Creative Industries faculty of a major metropolitan university.

Here, those findings are focussed on some of the motivations and concerns that impact the collaborative partnerships with businesses that make their workplaces available for student internships. Internships are common forms of WIL that equate to students undertaking work place activities related to their tertiary programs over an extended period either intensively over a number of weeks or part time over longer periods.

Businesses are not universities and do not perceive of themselves as primarily learning institutions. As universities seek to engage with industry partners and the professions to increase WIL opportunities for students it is important that partners' needs, motivations and workplace practices strongly inform the development of WIL curriculum and its implementation. It is only by establishing strong collaborative partnerships between universities, suitable work organisations and those students who will benefit from the integrated learning experience such partnerships can enable that WIL programs will be effective and sustainable in the longer term (Smith et al 2006). However, these partnerships need to be seen by universities as much more than the provision of institutional learning at sites outside the academy. Particularly, the businesses that are the work providing partners in WIL initiatives need to be seen as more than external resources that informatively support university controlled curriculum and pedagogy. The findings presented here suggest that the diversity of industry partner motivations and concerns contributing to WIL provision requires that universities understand and appreciate those partners as contributors with them to a culture of learning provision and support. These industry partner contribution need to be understood as valuing work as learning, not work as something that needs to be integrated with learning to make that learning more authentic and thereby more vocational.

**Work integrated learning partnerships**

Work integrated learning is a broad term usually used to describe institutionally prescribed learning that requires workplace participation. A report commissioned by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council, *WIL Report: A National Scoping Study* (Patrick et al., 2008:9) defines WIL as "an umbrella term for a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum". Within this definition WIL encompasses a range of on-campus and workplace learning experiences including project-based learning, service learning, work placements and internships.

The integration of discipline based theory and the practice of work has become an increasing priority for the Higher Education sector. Rightfully, partnerships between work providers and education institutions have become highly significant as the vehicle for WIL. A number of authors have identified the importance of partnerships between employers, students and institutional providers. Smith and Betts (2000:594) argue, "the nature and quality of the partnership depends on the level of involvement of each of the partners and the interactions between them". The term 'partnership' is particularly emphasised as the "conscious and active participation of all partners" to ensure the necessary strength of the relationships underpinning successful WIL provision are not misunderstood as loose associations of cooperation. Further, Smith and Betts (2000:594) reference Maclaren and Marshall (1998) who state that:

*In order to facilitate the learning process a form of cooperation occurs which is unique in educational terms; the overall emphasis is on collaboration to ensure the satisfaction of all parties.*

Notable in this collaboration is the position of the university as the learning provider and the work provision partner as the employer, two very different and distinct roles that act to separate learning and work. Smith and Betts (2000) argue that satisfaction is insufficient an outcome to support genuine partnership of this type. Successful partnership requires collaborative self-interest and transparency that is explicit about what all partners want and expect from the outset and how they will pursue this. This raises important questions about what employers want from WIL provision and how different this could be from the expectations of universities whose immediate learning provision role in the workplace may be reduced to administrative rather than pedagogic.

Equally, other authors have emphasized the importance and challenge of explicitly recognising and aligning the needs of stakeholders that forge successful WIL partnerships. The WIL Report (Patrick et al., 2008:38) recommends a stakeholder approach to the planning and implementation of WIL, which requires "clear agreements and the recognition of needs as well as mutual benefit and costs". In support of this, Reeders (2000:212)) cautions:

*Clearly, where university, student and employer goals for learning do not match, the program is unlikely to be productive. Where academics are driven by a concern with student learning but employers offer internship in order to get extra pairs of hands, learning outcomes are likely to be limited.*

However, Reeders (2000) research notes a broader list of employer goals that underpin their engagement in WIL provision. These wants and expectations include philanthropy, the useful screening of prospective recruits, opportunity to influence training outcomes, gaining up-to-date knowledge from students and stimulating internal and organisational reflection on practice and processes as well as potentially gaining an extra pair of hands. More recently, the National scoping study into WIL revealed "skills shortages and short and long-term recruitment objectives were identified as the main motivators for employers and professions for engaging with universities in providing WIL placement experiences to students" (Patrick et al., 2009:19). Patrick et al. (2009) also identified more altruistic motivations of some employers who saw "supporting WIL contributed to their industry". Making effective use of these various goals and those of all stakeholders in the partnership requires what Franz (2007) advocates as a more inclusive approach to WIL. Such an approach "recognizes the need for WIL curricula to be developed and implemented in context; a cultural context that acknowledges all the stakeholders and newly emerging philosophical, educational, social and economic needs" (Franz 2007:3). From this perspective, stakeholder interests span a much broader scope than isolated self-interest.

While strong partnerships between academics and industry are seen as essential for effective WIL, the literature provides evidence that establishing such partnerships is challenging. Collin and Tynjala (2003:343) reported that work based learning students identified "problems related to different aims of the collaborative partnerships (university, students and enterprises)" and incongruent expectations of students between the employers and the university. Collin and Tynjala (2003:343) noted the

"pedagogical design and implementation of work-based learning requires the parties involved to negotiate with each other and reach agreement on common principles". Those common principles cannot be found without rigorous negotiation. In relation to university partner expectations, Weisz and Smith (2005:605) warn of the danger of programs failing where there is limited academic engagement in these negotiations as well as the continuing facilitation of the program once started. Reeders (2000) and Patrick et al (2009) highlight a lack of academic staff resources such as workload provision and recognition as part of this limited engagement. As Weisz and Smith (2006) indicate, this amounts to a university deferring the responsibility for workplace learning to students and employers and thereby failing to make their own wants and expectations explicit and contributory to the negotiations that established the partnership.

Creating more permeability between higher education and the world of work is a significant challenge for the tertiary sector (Brennan & Little, 2006). Where WIL programs see universities partner with a few large organisations to provide internship opportunities for students the capacity to be transparent about the needs of stakeholders and negotiate with partners to deliver strong WIL experiences for students is seemingly possible. For WIL programs that involve hundreds of small-to-medium industry partners, such as the Creative Industries Program described below, the challenge is much more complex. Calls to stronger partnerships that sound from the literature rightfully highlight the need for explicit and candid disclosure of partner wants and expectations. The literature asserts that work provision partners' wants and expectations are demonstrably diverse, contradictory and contested relative to those of universities. These wants and expectations need to be canvassed, known, understood, appreciated and accommodated not as a set of external resources that inform WIL provision but as partner goals that drive WIL provision.

**WIL in the Creative Industries: Background to the Internship program**

The option to undertake an Internship is available to most final-year students in the Creative Industries Faculty. Students are able to commence their internships at any time through the year, to undertake intensive work with an organisation over a few weeks or an extended internship over a year. Throughout the internship, students undertake a number of assessment tasks. These tasks include preparing for the internship by completing a CV and Cover letter and an internship proposal that addresses among other things the internship aims and objectives, Occupational Health and Safety requirements and other legal requirements. Ongoing through the internship, students keep an online reflective blog, which they share with their academic supervisor. Finally students use these structured reflections to write an academic essay, which encourages them surface their tacit understandings and make new sense of their internship experience. (Schon, 1983:61) Additionally the industry partner evaluates the student's work against a set of generic criteria and standards supplied by the university through a paper-based evaluation form.

Over a year there can be up to 200 industry partners involved in supporting creative industries students on internships. Small-to-medium enterprises make up the majority of industry partners in this program. Students can take up internships within the Creative Industries sector and also with organisations outside the sector, particularly those organisations that seek to work with embedded creatives as a means of adding

value to their organisation. Students are encouraged to approach prospective organisations with the aim of establishing their own internships. Additionally, the university advertises internship opportunities to students online and manages an application process for these advertised industry partners. This involves collating student internship applications for the industry partner to assess.

**Researching industry partner perspectives**

To account for the diversity of industry partner perspectives influencing the partnership that is the Creative Industries internship program the following research was undertaken. The data reported is from interviews with 20 industry partners who provided formal work based experience opportunities for internship students. The industry partners interviewed represent various business organisations, including for profit and not for profit organisations, and small to medium enterprises and larger organisations. Student interns who worked with these industry partners came from a range of disciplines in the creative industries including Theatre, Creative Writing, Visual Arts, Music, Web and Interactive Design, Fashion, Creative Advertising and Media Communications.

The interviews were designed to enable industry partners to share their perspectives on the internship experience with a view to informing the ongoing development of the Internship program. Initially the industry partners were asked to provide background information about their role and previous experiences of internship both as supervisors or interns themselves. This was followed by a series of open questions designed to make explicit their perspectives on the reasons for offering an internship, the internship program design and assessment, approaches to the implementation of the internship and readiness for students to engage in the internship. The data was collected over twelve months and collated and analysed using open coding methods. The data presented here represents part of ongoing analysis. It offers some insight into industry partners' (i) reasons for engaging in the internship program, (ii) perspectives on supporting and assessing learning and (iii) perspectives on the continuing conduct of partnership.

**Reasons for engaging in the internship program**

The industry partners reported a number of key reasons for engaging with the Internship Program. Similar to what is reported in the literature (eg, Patrick et al., 2009), these key reasons identified a disparate range of motivations and concerns that were often dichotomous. For example, on the one hand partners indicated they were motivated to take on interns as a source of extra labour that benefited their organisation. On the other hand, industry partners were motivated to 'give back to the industry'.

Those industry partners who saw advantages to the organisation as the prime motive for taking interns identified a range of factors contributing to their decision. Partners saw interns as 'a good help in terms of catching up with work' and as potential source of new employers. They also saw interns as an opportunity to keep current with new ideas and technology. An industry partners observes: 'in terms of software, I mean he was much more across things than we were'. Another states: 'we like having them around because they're good…they give us new ideas and they're often younger so

they've got lots of energy'. Another industry partner saw creative industries interns adding value to the existing teams skill set by helping with very specific roles.

Those industry partners who identified 'give back to the industry' as a motivation for taking students saw the internship experience giving students confidence and 'empower[ing] them to go out into the workforce'. One industry partner who worked within the management side of the Music industry expressed a desire to 'work with students to develop their skills' which in turn would help address issues within the music business. He states:

> *It's only going to be better for everyone because one of the real problems with the music sector in Brisbane is that lack of infrastructure. Heaps of good bands, not enough people that know what they're doing in terms of label management.*

Industries partners also provided a range of divergent views on students as workers and learners as contributory to their reasons for engaging in the program. These views about students complemented their views about themselves as worker trainers or learner mentors. Through both sets of views the dichotomous nature of partner reasons for engaging in the internship program is nuanced by understandings of work as directly contributing to immediate enterprise productivity and work as learning for broader and more future oriented gains. Some partners identified there was a balance between working and learning. One partner stated: 'It was about 50% training and 50% working'. In contrast another industry partner did not view their role as trainer but rather saw their role as one of mentor. He stated:

> *We needed enough time with the students to really make sure the skills that they are developing are relevant to our operating needs. Because we are only a small- to-medium size business and we don't have a lot of idle time to train on the job so they have to come with something.*

This highlights the limited resources available in small-to-medium enterprises and the importance of getting the match of student skills to industry needs right. Small-to-medium enterprises make up a significant proportion of industry partners in this Creative Industries internship program. Time available for these small-to-medium enterprises is an index of the division between work and learning and thereby the dichotomous nature of partner reasons as both needing productivity from interns and wanting to support learning and the future of the industry.

From these very few illustrative examples it can be seen that the reasons for industry partners engaging in the internship program carry understandings about the nature of work and the nature of learning that are both alike and opposed. Integrating work and learning, the concept at the heart of WIL, would appear from industry partners' perspectives to include striking a balance between training and working perceptions, between time spent in skill development and application and between immediate productivity needs and future industry security. These motivations and concerns are clearly evident in the operation of the program as industry partners reasons for engaging. They may be said to represent a strong and divergent base of partner wants and expectations.

**Perceptions of readiness to support and assess interns**

The industry partners interviewed had varied experiences of supporting learning in their workplaces. Workplace supervisors mostly indicated they had not undertaken an internship in their own studies. A number of the industry partners from small to medium enterprises had little or no experience of supervising interns. Additionally small-to-medium enterprise partners noted their lack of a dedicated person with the responsibility to induct, mentor and support student interns. This was unlike the supervision of interns in larger organisation where often a key staff member (e.g. HR staff member) had key responsibility for interns.

Those who had supervised interns before seemed to be more comfortable with their supervision role. When asked if they used the industry partners' Information Pack supplied, one supervisor stated: 'The IP pack – helped but having had other experiences with interns was the main thing I used as guidance'. An industry partner in a small art gallery noted how her own experiences of internship had shaped how she mentored interns assigned to her. Another partner when reflecting on his own work place learning identified how his mentor modelled challenging aspects of the work:

> *100 years ago when I started as a journalist I had some you know, kind of mentors in a newsroom and they were really good in saying you know, okay, if you're going to make an uncomfortable phone call or whatever then this is how you go about it. ...Yeah, but no one ever teaches anyone stuff like that you know....*

In contrast another industry partner explained how the intern was supervised by the junior member of the team which had flow on benefits for this team member including giving her an opportunity to provide leadership and becoming more sensitive to other team members' work when she need to ask questions of others.

> *It was really good for our marketing assistant (entry level position of the team) – to have someone she could teach and become a leader. It made her feel special and needed within the team. And some of the day-to-day jobs could be given to [the intern] and she could try some more challenging work.*

Supervisors in small-to-medium enterprises often had limited or no experience in supporting interns and it was unlikely that they had undertaken an internship themselves. Without this experience the industry supervisors may lack skills to guide interns and "use of intentional workplace learning strategies, such as guided workplace learning (e.g. modeling, coaching, questioning, etc.)" (Billet, 2002: 457). This limited experience also raises questions about the industry supervisors' capacity to effectively assess the quality of an intern's work as their limited supervisory experience means they have limited knowledge of standards they can expect from interns. One industry partner who was a more junior staff member discussed her awkwardness in evaluating her intern. She states:

> *I felt a little bit umm, I guess awkward for marking people or umm... providing my evaluations of them directly to them because obviously like, I really liked both of our interns and they did do good work, but like I said they did have downfalls but I guess it's hard because I kind of become like part of the family so it's sort of hard to try and say these things you did well, but you didn't actually show these skills, yeah*

By contrast, some industry partner staff with supervisory responsibilities reported they felt comfortable evaluating intern students against the stated criteria and indicated they were happy for students to receive a copy of the evaluation. Moreover, many indicated they also provided verbal feedback against the criteria at the mid internship feedback session and at the conclusion of the internship as well as informally throughout the internship. In a few cases, partners indicated they would like more space for written comments to make the necessarily generic criteria and standards more relevant to the internship activities.

These perspectives on readiness to support and assess students' learning add further details to the understandings of work and learning that industry partners bring to and expect from the internship program. Previous experience, however limited, is an indicator of the degree to which industry partners can negotiate the boundaries and competing demands of their roles as work providers and learning supporters. These roles clearly differ and are similarly understood in terms of the divisions between work and learning that underpin their reasons for engaging in the program.

**Perceptions of the partnership: Issues of communication and collaboration**

The interviews also sought to identify industry partners' perspectives on the conduct of the partnership, particularly in relation to communication and collaboration with the institution. For the most part, industry partners felt the university provided Information Booklet was effective and efficient in providing key information about the program. However, many relied on their interns to provide this information. When asked if they remembered receiving email communication from university staff many were unsure and suggested because they received so many emails this form of communication would not be as effective for them.

A number of industry partners expressed a desire for greater communication and collaboration with the university. Several industry partners indicate more face-to-face discussion would assist them to better support the internship experience and would strengthen a 'collegiate approach' between the university and industry partner. They suggested opportunities to meet with university staff would be useful for a number of reasons. First, it would be an efficient way to clarify roles and expectations of stakeholders, as well as duty of care in areas such as workplace health and safety. Second, a few industry partners indicated information about the interns' academic studies would assist them to structure the workplace experience for their interns. Third, a number of partners felt there needed to be more opportunity to close the loop on the student's internship experience. Industry partners indicated the students were very communicative about the positive aspects of their internship. However the partners also indicated they would like more insight into the student's internship experience. One partner explained she would like more feedback 'to understand how they [the student] perceived their experience.' Another industry partner expressed his desire for a follow up call from an academic supervisor at the end of the internship so he could be updated on the student's results and the effectiveness of their internship training. He suggests:

> *I'll probably find out no doubt, how they went through their course and what level they achieved, where they were possible prior to their placement and what*

*happened to them afterwards. Umm...it's always something to know whether you're doing your training properly from your side, otherwise there might just be losing three months of their training by doing inappropriate....*

By contrast, a few industry partners were adamant that they didn't require further communication from the university in the form of site visits or phone calls. One partner states: 'I didn't really need anybody phoning me or asking how it was going'. Many partners were also clear that would not use a website to seek additional information.

As similarly indicated in the previous findings the range of partner perspectives about communicating and collaborating with the university reveals a diverse and dichotomous set of views. Some partners need and actively seek stronger links with the university. Others see no necessity for increased contact. They do however express a need to know how intern students fit with their organisations, fair through their internship experience and what outcomes students achieve not just through their internship experience but also through their university studies. These kind of information requirements clearly indicate that the industry partners see themselves as integral to learning, not just in the sense of the training undertaken by interns through their work experience, but also in the sense of that work experience contributing to the students' tertiary learning experience. Industry partners are learning providers, a partnership role that clearly exceeds work provision.

**Conclusion**

This research has focused on some of the particular perspectives that industry partners, who make their workplaces available for internships, bring to the collaborative partnerships necessary to effective WIL provision. The motivations and concerns that characterise these perspectives indicate a set of understandings about the nature of work, the nature of learning, and how these are integrated for the benefit of students' vocational learning. To reiterate, businesses are not universities and as is evidenced above, do not perceive of themselves as learning institutions per se. Their focus is productivity to meet market and client demand. However, the creative industries WIL internships they engage with demand that the learning aspects of work practice, however they are perceived, are strong and important contributors to students' tertiary learning experiences. Because of this, industry partner perspectives need to be understood as more than external resources that informatively support WIL provision. By virtue of the partnership arrangements these perceptions are fundamental bases of WIL. They are not simply additional to university resources or supplementary of university resources rather they are foundational.

Smith and Betts (2000) highlight the need for WIL stakeholders' self-interest to be explicit and actively pursued within WIL partnership arrangements. For industry partners that self-interest includes seemingly contradictory (1) reasons for engaging in internships, (2) understandings of their roles as trainers and mentors and thereby assessor of students' learning, and (3) need for information and adequate feedback that informs their contributions relative to student outcomes. There is a need to understand these self-interests more fully if the growth and success of work integrated learning provision is to continue in Australian universities.

Understanding industry partner self-interests goes to heart of understanding what WIL means, that is, what it means to integrate work and learning. From a practical or procedural standpoint, industry partners bring work and learning together as students' experience of contributing to organisational productivity. Their self-interests, as indicated in the findings above, are made explicit through the contradictions of roles and expectations they enact as work providers who must ensure students are gainfully deployed as workers and supported as learners. Conceptually, the accomplishing of these self-interests in these practical ways identifies work and learning as indistinct forms of internship experience. The student is not engaged in work and learning activities that can be made distinct, they are engaged in an internship.

The industry partners represented here are vitally concerned with what it means to integrate work and learning. They see their role as engaging and extending interns' work with the discipline-based knowledge that students have begun to practice at university. This is a learning provision in its richest sense – far more than the provision of a limited employment opportunity and far more than the external support of students' tertiary studies. These industry partners need to be understood as fundamental contributors to a culture of learning provision that values work as learning not work as something that needs to be integrated with learning.

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