

Enhancing the Business Placement Experience for International Students: Adapting a Student-Centered ‘6S’ Internship Delivery Model

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Abstract

Work Integrated Learning (WIL) significantly contributes to preparing students for real-world employment by developing essential professional communication and interpersonal skills in workplaces. However, international students often encounter challenges in securing and undertaking industry placements in their host country. These obstacles can negatively affect their educational outcomes and career readiness. To address these challenges, institutions must create more inclusive and supportive environments that facilitate meaningful industry engagement for international students and enhance their employability.

This study explores the placement experience of international students and evaluates how a student-centred internship delivery model, specifically, the ‘6S’ model implemented by the University of South Australia, can enhance these experiences and outcomes. Findings reveal that while participants encountered various challenges, such as visa conditions, lack of local experience, and limited professional networks, they considered cultural differences and language barriers to be less significant compared to previous studies. Notably, the personalised approach of the 6S model proved effective in promoting student engagement, ownership, and overall industry readiness. The internship experience was perceived as highly valuable, helping students navigate barriers and develop confidence, professional identity, and employability skills. These findings suggest that student-centred internship models can meaningfully support international students’ success in professional settings.

Keywords: Work Integrated Learning, Internship Delivery Model, Cultural and Language Barriers, Post-study Employment, International Students.

Introduction

Work Integrated Learning (WIL) plays a critical role in introducing students to authentic work environments that model the professional communication and interpersonal skills required in contemporary workplaces (Hodges & Martin, 2020). Work-based WIL

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models such as internships, placements, and practicums are widely recognised as significant contributors to enhancing graduate employability (Jackson & Dean, 2023; Thompson & Brewster, 2022). Accordingly, higher education institutions have increasingly prioritised the integration of WIL opportunities in various forms into academic programs (Jackson & Dean, 2023).

In Australia, international education was the third largest export sector, generating AUD\$37.4 billion in 2018-19 (Department of Education, n.d.). However, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted international education, restricting student mobility for nearly three years and accelerating the shift toward virtual work practices across many sectors, including the business sector (International Labour Organization, 2020). For international students, this meant reduced face-to-face communication, limited workplace interaction, and fewer opportunities to engage in traditional placement environments (Lin & Nguyen, 2021; Rzanova et al., 2022). A 2023 Joint Parliament Committee inquiry emphasised the need to enhance WIL access and recommended a national WIL framework to improve integration between industry and education (Parliament of Australia, 2023). The importance of improving international students' WIL experiences is also reflected in the National Strategy for International Education 2025 (Department of Education & Training, 2016) and in the Australian Collaborative Education Network's (ACEN, now renamed WIL Australia) strategic objectives (ACEN, 2022). Although student arrivals recovered in the post-COVID period (RBA, 2025), these changes highlight the need to re-examine WIL delivery models to ensure they remain accessible, supportive, inclusive (Jackson et al., 2025) and aligned with industry needs (TEQSA, 2022).

In addition to this post-COVID context, research indicates that international students, especially from a non-English speaking background, are highly motivated to engage in work-based WIL to gain relevant local work experience and enhance their post-study employment prospects. Nevertheless, international students continue to encounter a range of complexities when accessing and participating in placements, including negotiating multiple cultural expectations and adapting to unfamiliar workplace norms (Jackson, 2017; Pham et al., 2018; Vu et al., 2022). These overlapping complexities can make the placement experience both stressful and difficult to access, underscoring the need for more inclusive and supportive WIL delivery models (Garant-Jones, et al., 2024; Jackson et al., 2025; Winchester-Seeto, et al., 2015).

Accordingly, this study aimed to investigate international students' WIL experiences in the post-COVID era by addressing the following research questions:

- What concerns and barriers do international students encounter when accessing on-site placement opportunities?
- What are their learning experiences during placements?
- Are they satisfied with the information, advice, guidance, and support provided by the university in preparing for and completing their business placement?

- Are they satisfied with the information, advice, guidance, and support provided by their host organisation?
- What additional support or resources do they expect or require from the university and their host organisation to maximise the benefits of their business placement experience?

The research seeks to address a gap in knowledge of placement learning for international business student population in the post-COVID era. It also aims to support students navigating multiple languages and cultural dimensions to enhance their linguistic, cultural, and intercultural capabilities. The study ultimately explores the key challenges faced by international students and the roles universities and host organisations can play in making students' WIL experience more meaningful and impactful.

Literature Review

Benefits of WIL

WIL is a critical component of higher education. However, it holds particular significance for international students, who depend on these experiences to gain local workplace exposure, develop professional networks, and adapt to unfamiliar cultural and organisational contexts, compared to their domestic counterparts. It encompasses a range of structural practical experiences designed to provide students with meaningful exposure to work-related activities aligned with their field of study (Universities Australia, 2019). By allowing students to apply academic knowledge in real-world contexts, WIL helps prepare students for post-graduation employment and professional success (Jackson, 2024; Jackson & Dean, 2023). Research indicates that WIL equips students with critical employability skills and industry knowledge required to succeed in competitive job markets (Cheong et al., 2014; Edwards, 2014; Nunley et al., 2016). Beyond enhancing students' skillsets, WIL also strengthens collaboration between universities and host organisations, generating shared benefits such as improved student preparedness, stronger industry–university linkages, and better pathways into employment.

In addition to employment outcomes, WIL is positively associated with students' self-confidence and entrepreneurial intentions (EI) (Pretti et al., 2020). Entrepreneurship is widely viewed as a key driver of economic development, contributing to job creation, innovation, and national competitiveness (Maheshwari et al., 2023). Research has shown that students' EI is a significant predictor of entrepreneurial behaviour (Autio et al., 2001), and that WIL can positively influence these intentions (Otache, 2021). This is particularly relevant in the context of business placements, as WIL experiences can strengthen students' entrepreneurial skills and readiness for competitive business environments. By enhancing students' attitudes toward entrepreneurship and equipping them with relevant resources and skills, WIL increases their self-confidence to engage in entrepreneurial ventures following graduation.

Barriers to International Students Participating in WIL

Despite its well-documented benefits, participation in WIL is often more challenging for international students than for their domestic peers (Gribble et al., 2015). One key challenge stem from the need for them to navigate multiple layers of cultural dimensions, i.e., national culture, professional culture, and corporate culture, which are often bundled with linguistic barriers. These overlapping challenges can make WIL experiences particularly stressful for international students (Jackson, 2017; Pham et al., 2018; Vu et al., 2022).

In the past, employability discussions have been dominated by the concept of ‘skills acquisition’ (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). However, Tomlinson (2017) argues that employability is more than just skills acquisition (human capital) and proposes a ‘capital model’ as student employability encompasses social capital (social relations and contacts), cultural capital (cultural knowledge, behaviours, and awareness), identity capital (sense of personal identity) and psychological capital (level of resilience and adaptability). Within this model, the concept of ‘cultural competence’ has received increased attention. Cross et al. (1989, p.13) define cultural competence as ‘a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enables that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.’ Nguyen and Hartz (2020, p.333) provide a simpler definition, referring to cultural competence as ‘the capacity to work effectively in cross-cultural settings.’ These scholars emphasise the importance of developing cultural competence training within educational institutions to improve international students’ employability outcomes. Although originally developed in health and human services, the concept of cultural competence is now widely applied in WIL, where it is recognised as a key capability for effective workplace performance (Bandaranaike & Willison, 2016).

International students often encounter cultural shock as they adjust to new academic and professional environments (Lillyman & Bennett, 2014; Wang et al., 2012). Adapting to unfamiliar norms, communication styles, and workplace practices can be daunting. Furthermore, the absence of familiar social networks can contribute to feelings of isolation, further affecting students’ confidence and well-being. As Barton et al. (2019) point out, international students completing a work placement undergo a multi-layered socialisation process that includes adapting simultaneously to a new country, a new university setting, and a new professional setting, all of which can be both complex and overwhelming.

The literature consistently documents these challenges. For instance, Pham et al. (2018) identified limited English-language competence and a lack of familiarity with local workplace norms as major barriers to successful WIL participation. These factors can restrict students’ ability to communicate effectively, understand expectations, and integrate confidently into professional environments (Jackson, 2017; Tran & Soejatminah, 2017). Similarly, Coffey et al. (2021) examined the job-seeking experiences of international graduates and found that visa restrictions, limited work experience, and discriminatory hiring practices were major barriers to employment in Australia. Gribble et al. (2015), in a longitudinal study of international business and accounting students, reported that English proficiency, weak social networks, and

unrealistic expectations around employment were key obstacles to achieving positive WIL outcomes. In addition to these barriers, international students' difficulties were often compounded by inadequate preparation, limited socialisation opportunities, a lack of employability skills training, and insufficient guidance on cultural expectations.

In the Australian context, Jackson (2017) identified several challenges faced by international students undertaking WIL in Australia, including cultural misunderstandings, unrealistic expectations, difficulty in managing assessment tasks, limited language proficiency, and inconsistent support provision, as factors affecting student performance and the success of their WIL experience. The study proposed a range of practical strategies to address these challenges, such as pre-packaged modules, employer panels, student testimonials, expectation guides, and resource templates etc. These interventions reflect emerging WIL models that are already being implemented across Australian universities, with multiple examples reported in national studies of emerging WIL approaches prevalent in the tertiary sector (Ferns, et al., 2018; Kay et al., 2020).

However, desktop research has shown that resources to support international students' engagement in WIL are dispersed across multiple university websites, faculty-specific pages, careers portals, and external government or industry platforms. This reflects broader sector trends in which WIL engagement increasingly involves brokers, alumni networks, community organisations, and global partners, resulting in resources being distributed across multiple platforms rather than consolidated in a single location (Kay et al., 2020). This makes it difficult for students to locate relevant information in a timely and accessible manner. There is a need to investigate international students' perceptions regarding the availability, accessibility, and effectiveness of WIL support resources, with the aim of enhancing equity of access to work-based learning opportunities.

In summary, the literature suggests that international students face multifaceted and interrelated challenges when pursuing WIL opportunities. These include cultural and linguistic barriers, limited social networks, and systemic issues within institutions and host organisations. Addressing these barriers requires a coordinated and holistic approach, involving better preparation, cultural adaptation support, accessible resources, and responsive institutional policies.

Addressing Barriers through Institutional and Collaborative Approaches

International students often face a range of challenges when trying to access and participate in WIL, including adjusting to a new culture, communicating in a second language, and building professional networks. Increasingly, the literature emphasises the importance of institutional support and collaboration with industry partners in improving placement outcomes (Tran et al., 2024). Developing student employability skills requires sustained support at both institutional and personal levels. While WIL offers students opportunities to apply theoretical and non-technical skills in real-world settings, it does not automatically guarantee post-graduate employment (Wilton, 2012). Because of this, preparing students to engage effectively

in professional contexts and managing their expectations about what WIL can realistically offer becomes essential, as these forms of preparation help students translate WIL experiences into longer-term employability outcomes (Blackmore et al., 2014).

One effective approach is the use of post-WIL interventions that encourage students to critically reflect on and evaluate their experiences. Billett et al. (2018) emphasise that such interventions can take various forms, but their core purpose should be to deepen students' understanding of how WIL experiences shape their professional growth and learning. This reflective process can build confidence and facilitate smoother transitions into the workforce. In addition, scholars highlight the value of reflexive practices, which prompt students to examine their own assumptions, identities, and positionality within professional contexts, further strengthening their capacity to learn from WIL experiences (Trede, 2012).

Another vital strategy for improving the quality and impact of WIL involves strengthening university–industry collaboration (UIC), as close partnerships help ensure that placements are well-designed, relevant, and adequately supported. For these collaborations to be effective, shared objectives and adequate resource allocation are essential, along with long-term planning (Liew et al., 2013). Since successful placements involve multiple stakeholders (e.g., students, universities, and host organisations), all parties must actively contribute to positive outcomes. Alpert et al. (2009) suggest that host organisations increasingly prioritise employability skills over academic performance, which means universities must proactively support students in developing these skills.

Tran (2016) further highlights the importance of university-enterprise collaboration (UEC) for fostering workplace readiness, noting two primary reasons: (1) industry demand for discipline-specific, work-ready graduates; and (2) the need for industry input if universities are to genuinely integrate employability goals into academic programs. In line with this, Pham et al. (2018) recommend that universities:

- Partner with government and industry to create a more consistent and integrated WIL system;
- Foster inclusive environments where international students feel accepted and supported;
- Promote diverse perspectives by encouraging international students to share their experiences and worldviews; and,
- Provide communication training to help students navigate different workplace cultures.

Although historically UIC and UEC have focussed on innovation and knowledge transfer (O'Leary, 2013), recent emphasis on career development learning has positioned graduate employability as a strategic priority for universities (Jackson & Edgar, 2019). As a response to these shifting priorities and the specific challenges faced by international students, the University of South Australia's Business School (UniSA Business) has developed and implemented a student-centred internship model—the 6S Framework—designed to foster inclusive, supported, and industry-relevant placement experiences.

The 6S Framework: A Student-Centred Internship² Model

In response to the diverse challenges faced by students—particularly international students—in securing and completing industry placements, UniSA Business has developed a student-centred internship model grounded in the 6S Framework. This framework aims to enhance student agency, employability, and satisfaction through a structured, reflective, and supportive WIL experience.

The students participating in this study were either currently undertaking or had recently completed a business internship through UniSA Business. The internship program is offered to both undergraduate and postgraduate students with two options available:

- a 15-day internship course (equivalent to one elective course and 4.5 units²), or
- a 30-day internship course (equivalent to two elective courses and 9 units).

Students choose between these options depending on the number of available electives in their study plan, their preferences, and the duration of internship projects secured with local businesses. These factors are important because they directly affect students' ability to take up WIL opportunities, influencing the types of opportunities they can pursue and whether those opportunities fit within their study and life commitments.

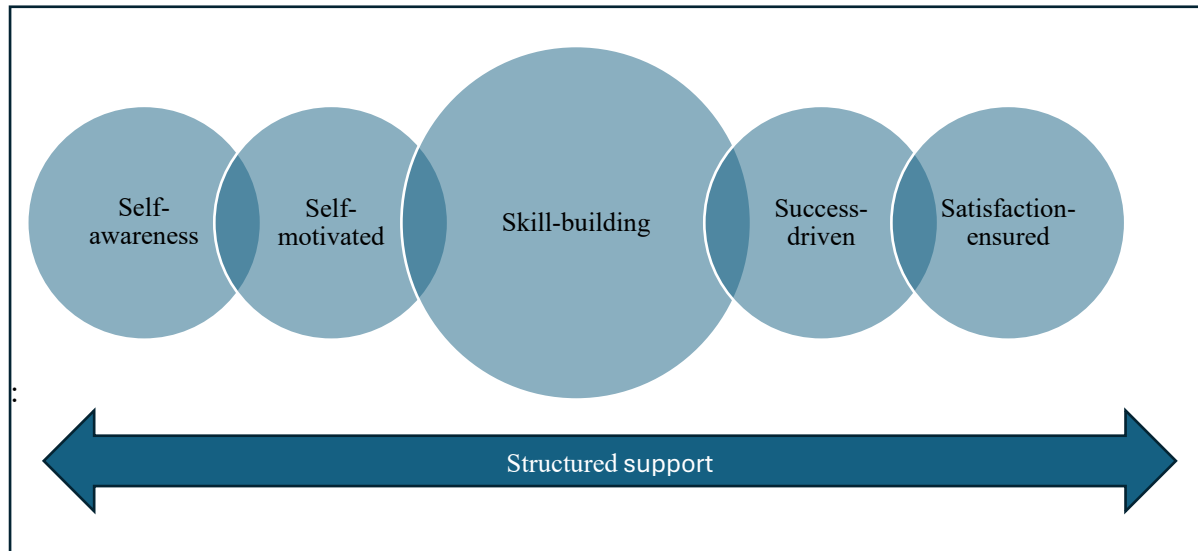
The UniSA Business Internship Program is structured to support different student pathways and varying levels of student independence. The 6S Framework (Figure 1) comprises six interconnected elements that together guide how the program is designed and delivered, providing a consistent structure to plan and support WIL experience.

² In this paper, the terms “placement” and “internship” are used interchangeably to refer to structured, work-based learning experiences undertaken by students as part of their program at UniSA Business.

² An elective is a subject (course) that students choose from any degree taught at UniSA, rather than one mandatory for their core program. One 4.5-unit course is one subject, equivalent to one-eighth of a full-time year.

Figure 1.

The 6S Framework of the UniSA Business Student-Centred Internship Program



- *Self-awareness*: Students engage in reflective activities to understand their strengths, weaknesses, and learning needs before and during the internship.
- *Self-motivated*: Students are encouraged to set their own goals and proactively seek opportunities to meet them, promoting independence and accountability.
- *Skill-building*: A central pillar of the framework, this element focusses on equipping students with hands-on experience and the ability to apply relevant employability skills.
- *Success-driven*: Learning objectives, assessments, and progress checkpoints help students track and celebrate their growth throughout the internship.
- *Satisfaction-ensured*: Student feedback is actively collected to ensure experiences are fulfilling, and to continuously improve program delivery.
- *Structured support*: Academic and professional mentors provide consistent guidance, ensuring students feel supported throughout their industry journey.

Importantly, this framework is operationalised through a dual-mentorship model. Each student receives one-on-one guidance from both an academic mentor and an industry mentor (i.e., their host supervisor). The academic mentor, supplied by the university, initiates the internship with an orientation meeting, monitors student progress, encourages reflective learning, and addresses concerns throughout the placement. The industry mentor, provided by the host organisation, oversees task allocation, supports day-to-day learning, and provides ongoing feedback. The framework plays an important role in the offering of the Business Internship Program in UniSA Business and contributes to the successful completion of around 400 student internships per annum. Within the framework, domestic and international students receive an equal amount of support in helping to source internship opportunities and facilitating internship completions.

However, as discussed earlier, international students continue to face more challenges in securing, conducting, and completing internships with Australian businesses (Jackson, 2017). These challenges are often shaped by language barriers, unfamiliarity with local workplace culture, and limited professional networks (Coffey et al., 2021). Although racism and discrimination are recognised in the literature as significant barriers for many international students (Coffey et al., 2021; Mackaway et al., 2024; Mackay et al., 2024), these issues were not raised by participants in this study and were not a specific focus of this project. Instead, the current study examines international students' lived experiences and perspectives related to placement-based WIL activities, with a particular attention to how these experiences support the development of cultural awareness, communication skills, and employability capabilities.

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was employed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, drawing on the research design used by Lawlis et al. (2021). Quantitative data, gathered via a structured student survey, provided a broad overview of international students' placement experiences and challenges. Qualitative data, collected through a follow-up focus group discussion, offered deeper insights into students' personal reflections and perceptions. This combination allowed for both breadth and depth of understanding regarding international students' engagement with work-integrated learning (WIL) in an Australian business context.

The study targeted international students enrolled in a UniSA Business internship course during the following academic terms:

- Summer School (Study Period 7: November 2023 – February 2024)
- First Semester (Study Period 2: March – June 2024)
- Winter School (Study Period 4: June-August 2024)

Both undergraduate and postgraduate students were eligible to participate.

This study was approved by the UniSA Human Research Ethics Committee and as per the ethics requirement, students were provided with a Participant Information Sheet prior to data collection, which explained the purpose of the study, outlined what participation involved, and assured students of confidentiality and anonymity. Participation was entirely voluntary, and students were informed that they could withdraw at any time without consequence. The information sheet also highlighted that some survey questions might evoke emotional discomfort, particularly those relating to cultural or language-related challenges. As a token of appreciation, participants were offered a chance to enter a draw to win one of two \$100 gift cards.

The online survey comprised five sections with a total of 37 questions. The first section gathered demographic information such as age, gender, level of study, and country of origin. The second section explored the challenges of studying abroad, including cultural adjustment, social integration, and language barriers. The third section focussed on students' preparation

for WIL and their access to placement opportunities and institutional support. The fourth section examined students' placement experiences, with questions about workplace culture, communication challenges, and learning outcomes. The final section invited students to reflect on their overall placement experience, including perceived benefits, areas for improvement, and levels of satisfaction. At the end of the survey, students were given the opportunity to opt into a focus group discussion to further explore and elaborate on emerging themes.

A total of 94 international students completed a business internship during the study period. An invitation to complete the survey was sent to all 94 students, with 40 completing the survey, resulting in a 42.5% response rate. Of these, 15 students exited the survey after completing only the first two sections. From nine students who expressed interest in the focus group, four participated in the discussion.

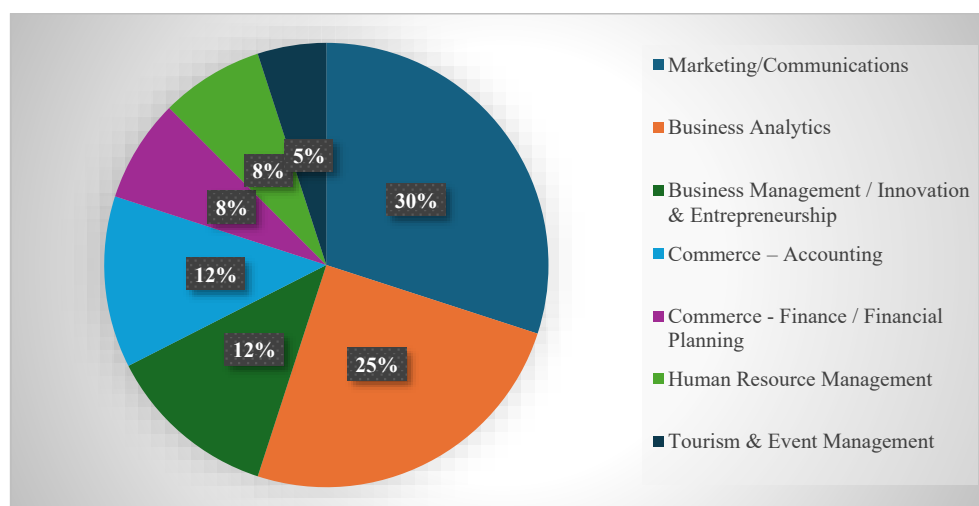
Results and Discussion

Demographic Characteristics

Of the 40 participants who participated in the survey, the vast majority (92.5%) were postgraduate students, with only three identifying as undergraduates. More than 50% of the participants were enrolled in specialisations related to Marketing/Communications or Business Analytics (see Figure 2). Two-thirds of the participants identified as female, and nearly half (19 out of 40) were young adults under the age of 25. A further 15 participants were aged between 26-35, while only 6 were older, indicating a relatively young cohort.

Figure 2.

Respondents' Areas of Specialization Within the Broad Business Discipline



Regarding the geographic origin of participants, the largest proportion of students came from India (15 students), followed by China (6), Sri Lanka (4), and Hong Kong SAR (2). Additional countries of origin included Colombia (2) and one each from Malaysia, Nepal,

Panama, Thailand, the Maldives, Ghana, and Kenya. This highlights the wide range of cultural backgrounds represented in the internship program.

Placement Details of the Participants

Among the 40 international student participants, approximately two-thirds completed a 15-day business placement, equivalent to 112.5 work hours and 4.5-unit course credit. An additional 22% completed a 30-day business placement (225 work hours, 9-unit course credit), while only one student completed a 45-day placement (337.5 work hours, 18-unit course credit). Another two students completed a 20-day voluntary placement, which did not contribute towards course credit. This distribution reflected the overall enrolment trends observed in UniSA Business internship courses during the specified study periods.

In terms of host organisations, more than half of the students (52.2%) completed their placement with a small organisation (employing less than 19 employees). The remainder were evenly spread across medium-sized (employing 20-199 employees, 13%), large organisations (employing 200 or more employees, 13%), education providers (including universities, colleges, and schools, 13%), and government departments (8.7%). This diverse spread reflected the typical distribution of host organisations in UniSA Business internship courses during the study periods and provided students with valuable exposure to a range of professional settings and workplace cultures in Australia.

Living in Australia as an International Student - Challenges and Barriers

When reflecting on their broader experiences of living in Australia, two-thirds of respondents reported being either satisfied or very satisfied. A notable 85% expressed satisfaction with their improvement in English language skills, and a similar proportion appreciated the opportunity to build friendships. However, satisfaction with work experience opportunities within their field of study was lower, at 62.5%, and dropped further to 57.5% regarding their ability to secure employment while studying.

When asked to identify the most significant challenges they faced as international students, participants highlighted establishing a new social network, managing academic workload and expectations, and navigating sociocultural norms as the top three. Surprisingly, language difficulties, culture shock, and perceived discrimination were ranked as less significant concerns, marking a shift from earlier studies (e.g., Jackson, 2017) which had identified language as a primary barrier for international students in Australia. These findings suggest that there is value in establishing a longitudinal study to verify whether this shift persists over time.

Additional challenges identified by the participants could be grouped into two categories: Employment-related issues (e.g. breaking into the professional circle, finding a job on a student visa, securing employment, searching for jobs or internships) and emotional and financial stress (e.g. homesickness, loneliness, family and self-expectations, cost of living).

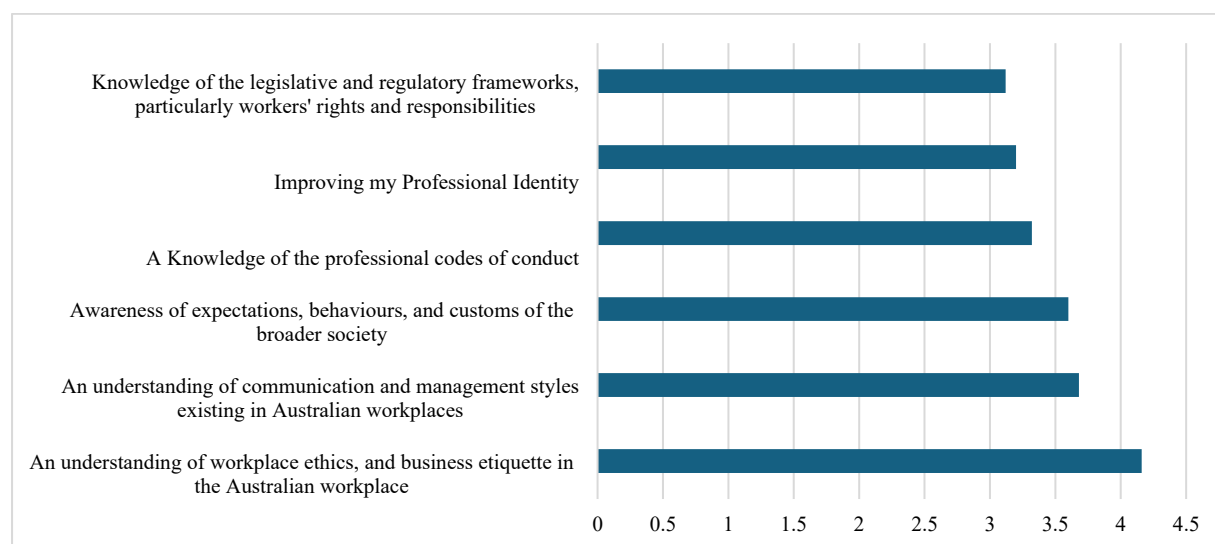
Preparedness for Working in an Australian Business

The majority (88%) of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that accessing WIL, such as internships, is a priority for international students in Australia. A notable 40% of respondents felt that there was a lack of support available to help international students engage in WIL and maximise the benefits of WIL opportunities. Half of the participants reported having prior work experience in their discipline before conducting their university-arranged placement, but only 22% of those had obtained that experience within Australia.

Pre-placement preparation is crucial to successful internship experience (Grible et al., 2015), particularly for international students as they face additional cultural and contextual challenges compared to their domestic peers (Jackson, 2017; Pham et al., 2018; Vu et al., 2022). Among the six key areas of pre-placement preparation that help international students to be better prepared for their placement, participants ranked understanding workplace ethics and business etiquette in Australian contexts as the most important (mean score = 4.16 out of 6). This was followed by understanding communication and management styles commonly used in Australian workplaces (3.68), and gaining awareness of broader societal expectations, behaviours, and customs (3.60) (see Figure 3).

Figure 3.

Participants' Perception of the Important Areas of Pre-Placement Preparation

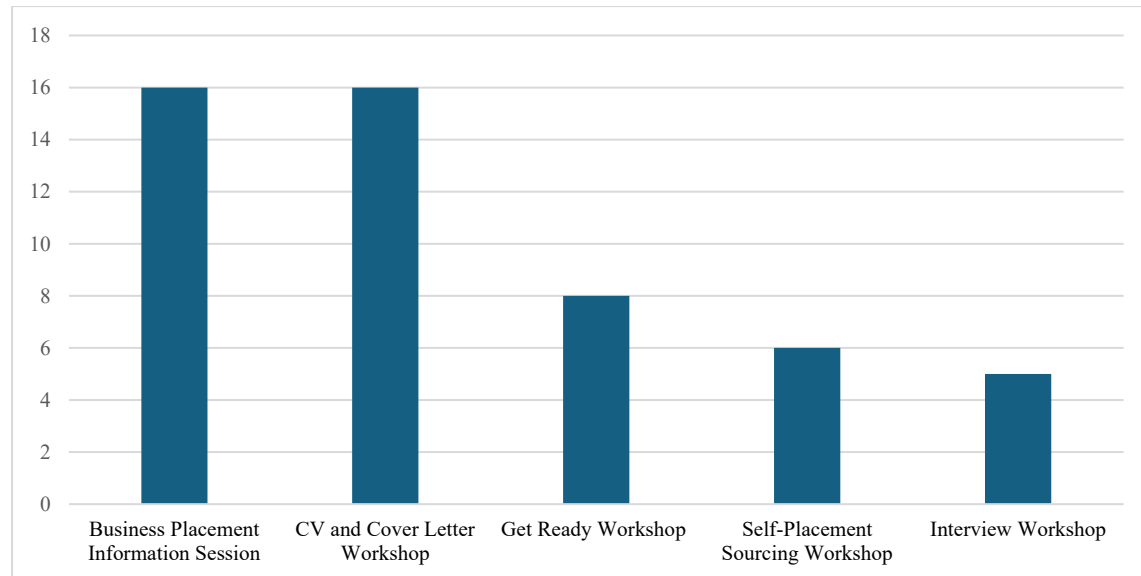


UniSA Business offers a suite of pre-placement preparation activities to support students undertaking both placements for credit and not-for-credit. As illustrated in Figure 4, the majority of participants had attended the key business placement information sessions and CV and cover letter writing workshops. There were 4 students who indicated that they had not attended any of the pre-placement offerings. Their reasons for non-attendance included a lack of awareness (“I didn’t know about them”) and a perception of limited need due to alternative exposure to industry (“University conducts Annual meetings with potential employers”).

When asked whether there were any changes or additions they would like to see in the pre-placement events they attended, 86% of respondents indicated that they were satisfied, with comments such as “no, it is great as is,” suggesting that the sessions met their expectations and needs.

Figure 4.

Participants' Attendance of UniSA's Pre-Placement Preparation Activities



The survey then asked participants to self-rate their preparedness for working in an Australian business environment across several key skill areas commonly valued by employers. As illustrated in Table 1, students felt more confident in their transferable or ‘soft’ skills, such as ‘ability to work in a team’, ‘communication skills – verbal and written’, ‘problem-solving skills/critical thinking’, or ‘ability to be adaptable to new situations/tasks’. In contrast, they reported lower level of confidence in practical or applied skills, including ‘understanding of employers’ expectations from their staff’, ‘ability to apply technical/practical skills to real tasks’, ‘understanding of workplace ethics, and business etiquette in the Australian workplace’ or ‘knowledge of the subject matter’. These skills are more practical and can be developed in real work-settings through arrangements such as placements or internships.

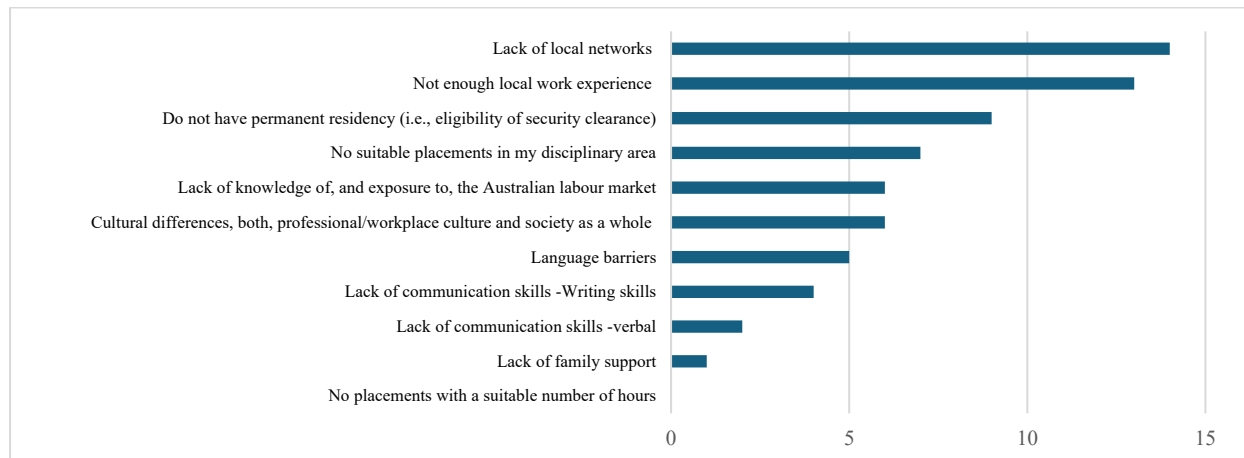
Table 1.*Participants' Preparedness for Working in an Australian Business*

Key skills	Not well at all	Slightly well	Moderately well	Very well	Extremely well
Ability to work in a team		1	6	9	8
Communication skills – verbal		3	8	8	6
Communication skills – written		2	9	7	6
Problem-solving skills/critical thinking		2	8	9	6
Ability to be adaptable to new situations/tasks		1	6	11	7
Understanding of employers' expectations from their staff		4	6	5	8
Ability to apply technical/practical skills to real tasks	1	4	6	8	6
Understanding of workplace ethics, and business etiquette in the Australian workplace	1	5	8	9	2
Knowledge of the subject matter		4	8	8	5

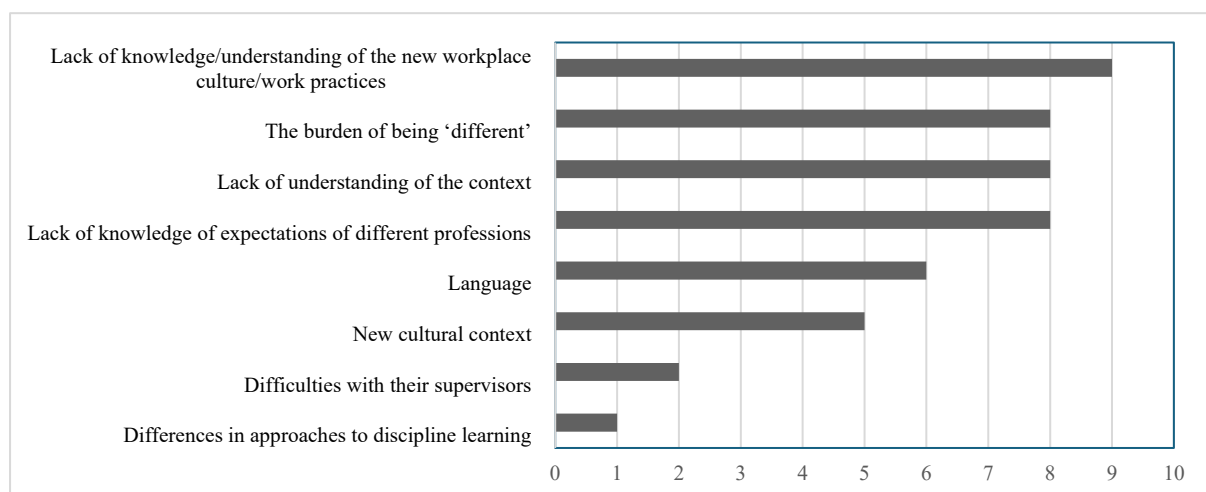
Note. Numbers represent the frequency of student selections.

Perceived Cultural and Language Challenges

As discussed earlier, international students, compared to their domestic counterparts, often face additional challenges in securing and succeeding in placements – primarily due to their limited local networks, and potential cultural or language barriers. To further explore these perceptions, the survey asked students to identify specific challenges they encountered in securing placement opportunities in Australia. As expected, the most identified challenges were ‘a lack of local networks and insufficient local work experience’, followed by ‘not holding permanent residency in Australia’, which can impact eligibility for roles requiring security clearance (Figure 5).

Figure 5.*Challenges Faced by International Students in Securing Placement Opportunities*

These findings were echoed in the follow-up focus group discussion. One student shared that despite having nearly eight years of experience with multinational companies like American Express and Liberty Insurance in Hong Kong, Australian employers appeared to prioritise local experience and “don't quite look at the past experience”. Similarly, during their placements, international students reported several challenges specific to adapting to a new professional environment (Figure 6).

Figure 6.*Challenges Faced by International Students When Undertaking Placement*

The most frequently cited difficulties included a lack of knowledge or understanding of local workplace culture and practices, uncertainty about professional expectations across different fields, and a limited grasp of the broader contextual factors influencing work tasks and interactions. Additionally, many students described experiencing the burden of being ‘different’—feeling out of place or self-conscious due to cultural, linguistic, or professional

unfamiliarity. These challenges highlight the complex interplay between cultural adaptation and professional integration that international students must manage during WIL.

Interestingly, challenges such as ‘cultural differences - both professional/workplace culture and broader societal’ and ‘language barriers’ were not perceived as significant as the lack of local networks or local work experience. This finding stands in contrast to much of the international education literature, which highlights the complexity of cultural adjustment and the impact of language barriers (Jackson, 2017), as well as instances of racial discrimination and violence against international students (Collins, 2006; Ramia, 2018; Ramia, 2021).

Prior to commencing their placement, a similar number of students anticipated that language barriers or cross-cultural challenges might impact their ability to settle into the workplace (Figure 7a) or impact their performance when undertaking placement (Figure 7b). However, during the placement experience, most students reported they did not experience significant language or cultural challenge at the workplace (see Figure 8).

Figure 7a.

Anticipated Impact on Settling in The Workplace Prior to Placement

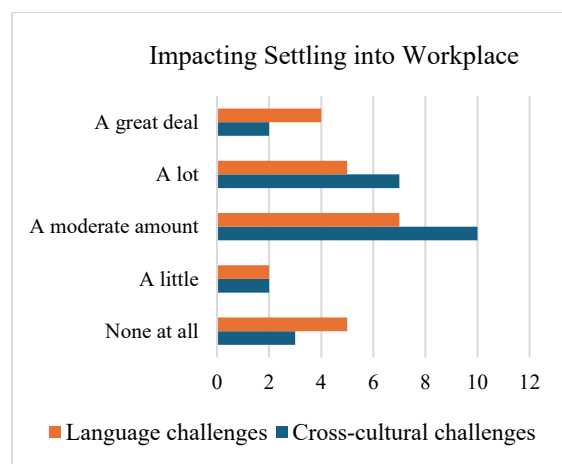


Figure 7b.

Anticipated Impact on Performance in the Workplace Prior to Placement

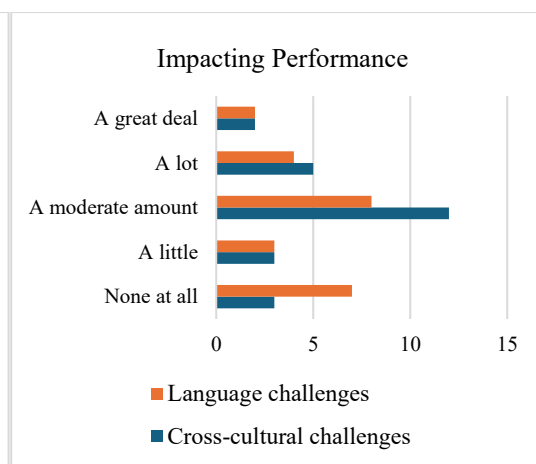
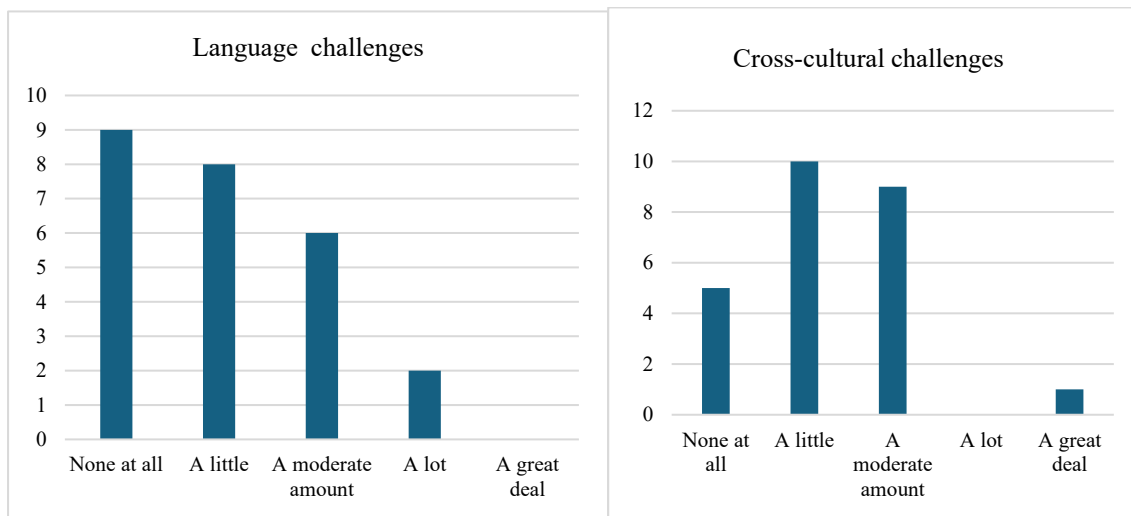


Figure 8.*Perceived Language or Cultural Challenges during Placement*

The limited language challenges identified by participants were mostly related to accent or speaking pace as highlighted in their comments below:

- “Accent of the people from different places”.
- “Some Australian slang and local Aussies Fluency in Speaking”.
- “Sometimes they talk so fast that I can't keep up”.
- “Some local expressions”.

Similarly, the limited cultural challenges identified tended to relate more to adapting to Australian workplace culture rather than broader cultural or language misunderstandings. Table 2 presents selected comments that illustrate these challenges in the students’ own words.

Table 2.*Challenges Related to Workplace Culture in Australia*

• Networking • Not very sure the extent that we should initiate the conversations during worktime since everyone are busy at their work • Responding to emails or letters • Understanding work requirements, chain of command and timings • Interpersonal relationships	• It's a bit hard to chit-chat with the Australian colleagues and they know the interns are only staying for 2-3 months, they might not be interested to get to know us. • I don't feel completely welcomed in my internship though I also understand that I was there for a short amount of time • They make some jokes, but I must watch the news to catch up
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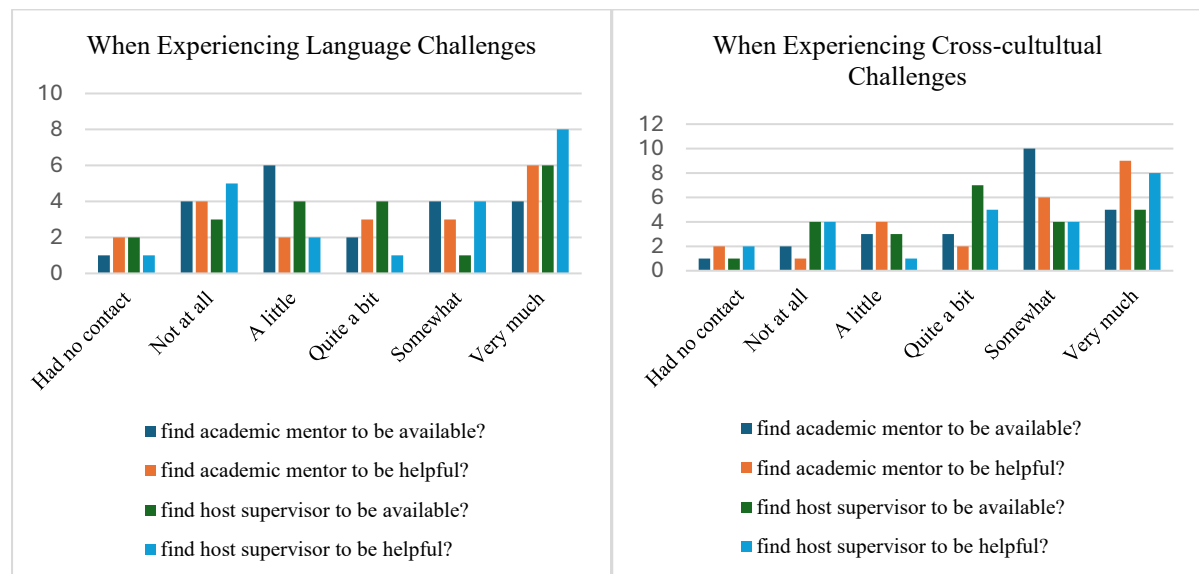
The difficulty of adjusting to communication styles in professional settings also emerged as a significant theme during the focus group discussions. One participant described their experience of not understanding the local humour: “So for me, I think most of the time we have few conversations. There are times I don't see certain things funny, you know, but they see it to be funny.” Another student reflected on confusion about expected communication styles in formal settings: “It's difficult to determine. In some business occasions where I met people for the first time, I thought communication should be formal—but most people used informal communication.” One participant shared a particularly disheartening moment:

I remember there was a time one of our colleagues sent me a list of about 10 questions. I looked at the questions and said I can't answer any of them. The person was like—how? That moment felt very local, you know? I felt like I was an idiot, right?

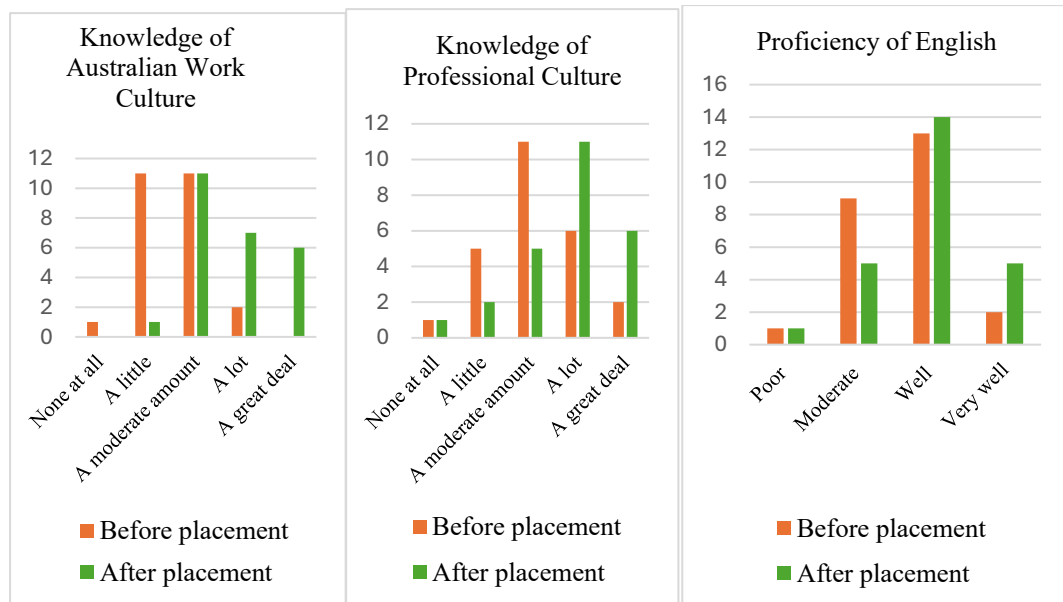
Other students discussed their struggles with using “work language” or professional jargon: “I feel like I could have a good conversation, but when it comes to work—like work language—I struggle a little bit.” Language comprehension was further complicated by unfamiliar accents: “When Australians speak in their Australian accent, it's like... so, so strong. Sometimes I have to ask them to repeat or speak slowly—even though I can speak English quite well in casual conversation.”

Perceptions of Support Received

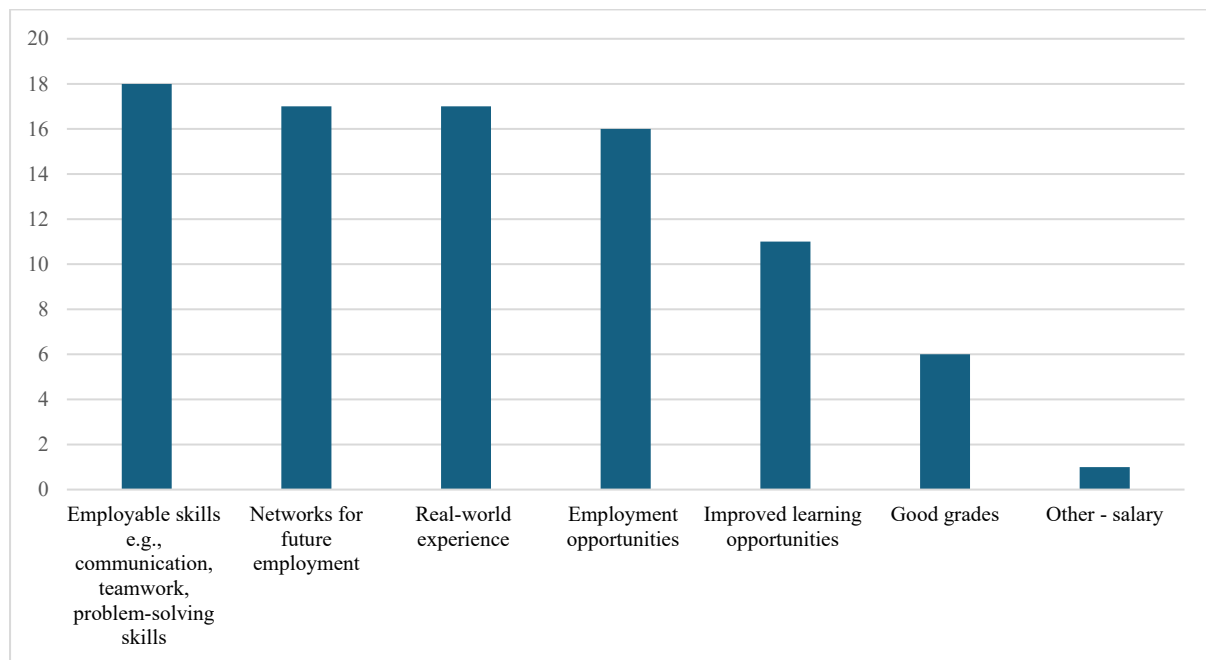
As outlined earlier, UniSA provides one-to-one academic mentoring support for students undertaking business internships through formal course arrangements. In addition, host organisations assign on-site supervisors to guide and support students during their placement experience. The survey explored students' experiences in accessing and receiving support from both their academic mentors and host supervisors. When facing language challenges in the workplace, most students reported that both their academic mentor and host supervisor were approachable and responsive, and helped when needed. A similar pattern emerged in relation to cultural-related challenges—students indicated that they were able to seek and receive support from both sources when necessary (see Figure 9).

Figure 9.*Perceived Support Received from Unisa and Host Organisation**Internship Outcomes*

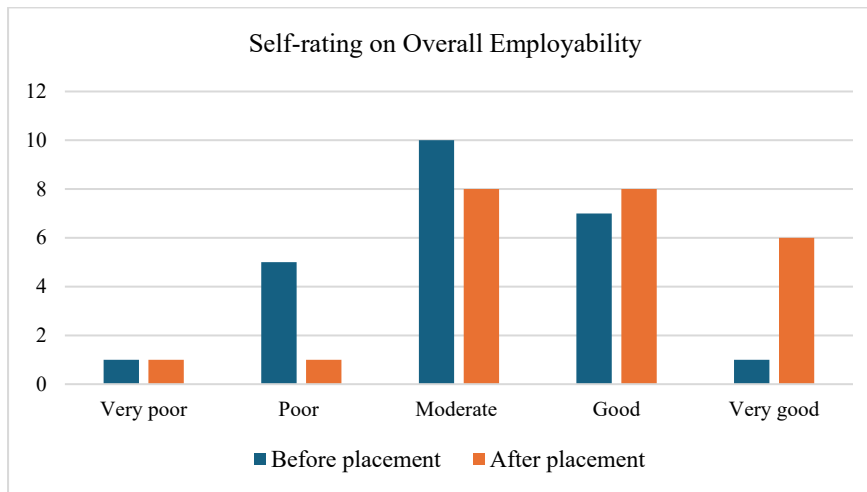
As illustrated in Figure 10, participants' self-rating of their overall employability improved significantly after completing their placement, compared to their perceptions prior to the experience. It was also encouraging to note that students' understanding of Australian work culture, professional norms in their disciplinary area, and their English language proficiency had significantly improved following the internship (see Figure 10).

Figure 10.*Respondents' Knowledge of Australian Work & Professional Culture and English Proficiency*

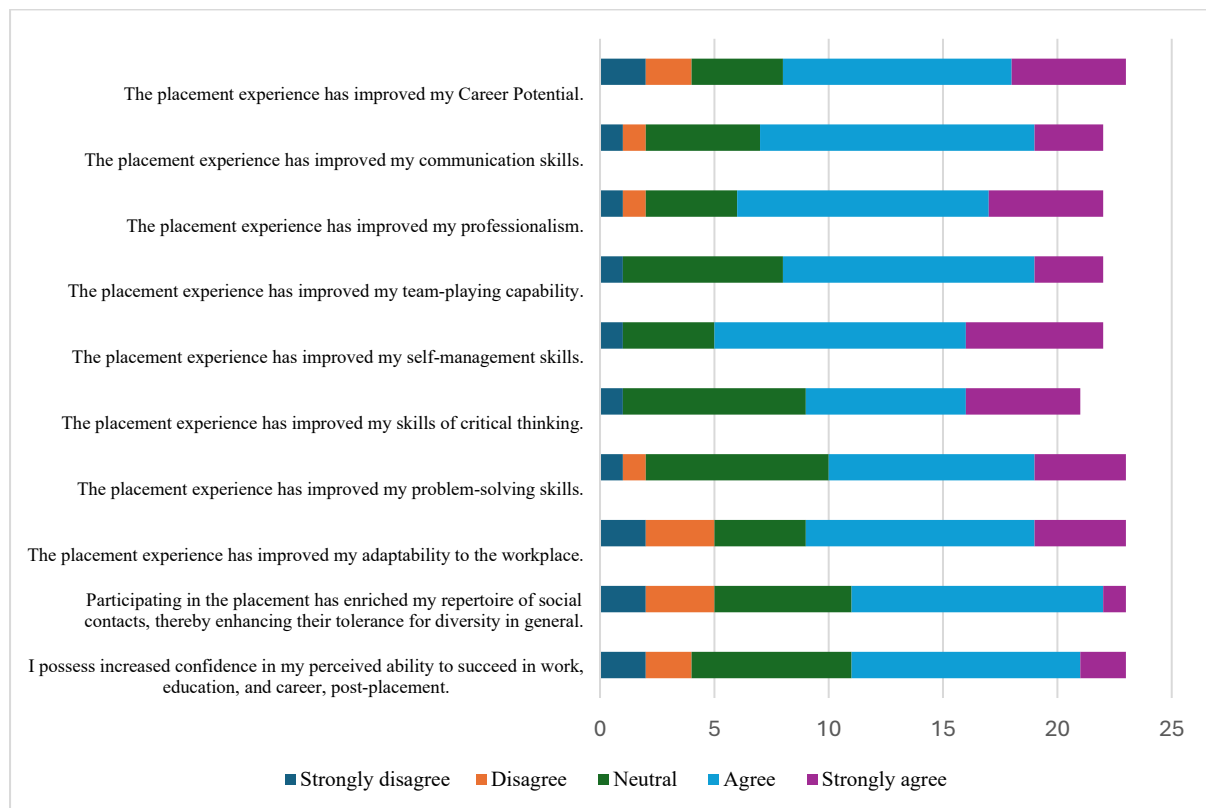
This positive shift aligns closely with the key aspirations students held prior to commencing their internship. As shown earlier in the survey (Figure 11), students identified employable skills (e.g., communication, teamwork, problem-solving), networks for future employment, real-world experience, and job opportunities as their most valued hoped-for gains. The observed enhancement in students' perceived employability—alongside improved cultural knowledge, language skills, and workplace understanding—suggests that the placement experiences are largely fulfilling these expectations.

Figure 11.*Gains That Participants Hoped to Get at the Start of Their University Placement*

The internship not only offered exposure to Australian workplace practices but also provided opportunities to apply and refine transferable skills in real professional settings. As a result, students reported increased confidence in their ability to transition into the workforce, particularly within the Australian context (Figure 12). The survey further asked students whether they had gained any employment opportunities as a direct result of their placement. Of the 20 students who responded to this question, six (30%) reported receiving an employment offer following their internship experience.

Figure 12.*Self-Rating on Overall Employability Before and After Placement**Benefits of the Placement Experience*

The benefits of completing a placement were clearly reflected in both the survey results and focus group discussions. As shown in Figure 13, around 80% of participants reported significant improvement in their self-management skills, followed closely by gains in professionalism and communication skills. Over 60% also indicated enhanced teamwork capabilities as a direct outcome of their placement experience. While the development of employability/transferrable skills was a core outcome, students also gained valuable insights through mentorship and workplace exposure. Several participants described the ongoing support provided by their host supervisors—even beyond the formal internship period. One student noted that their supervisor continued offering mentorship during the job-seeking process, highlighting the long-term value of these relationships.

Figure 13.*Participants' Perception of Their Placement Experience in Australia*

Focus group discussions revealed a deeper understanding of professional and ethical practices in specific work contexts. A marketing student reflected on how nonprofit sector constraints required greater sensitivity in messaging:

They are a nonprofit organisation, so they must be really careful with the words they use. We couldn't just apply typical marketing language. My supervisor explained the difference in how to market in that kind of context. That was something I didn't really get to experience in the theoretical space at Uni.

Similarly, an accounting student shared how the internship exposed them to Australia-specific ethical and regulatory expectations: "I'm an accountant from Ghana, and I thought accounting was universal. But I found out that in Australia it has jurisdictional nuances. I had to understand the local ethics and work environment."

When asked what they valued most, students highlighted a wide range of outcomes, including:

- "An opportunity to work with the public sector".
- "Communication, sharing idea and learning new software".
- "Employment opportunities and networking".

- “Getting a feel of how I will experience once I start working in my career in future”;
- “It was a real eye opener”.
- “Local experience, local industry knowledge and updated skills for the future career”.
- “Real world industry exposure”.
- “Support and hands on projects that I can leverage for the future”.
- “Peer interaction and supportive team environments”.

Gaining local experience was particularly significant for international students. Many perceived this as essential to improving employability in Australia. As one student shared:

I’m an international student and I find that this internship has given me some local experience. In Australia, most of the employers that I encountered while job hunting value local experience more. So, this internship can allow me some local experience that I can showcase to the future employer.

Another student described the condensed learning they experienced: “Even though it was just a month, I was able to learn a lot. The team was quite amazing, and I was able to comprehend so many things quickly”.

Internship settings also gave students a chance to lead projects and collaborate closely with others. One participant, placed in a nonprofit organisation, reflected: “We got to lead the content design and collaborate like a real team. It wasn’t just internship tasks—it was hands-on, guided work that mirrored the organisation’s practices.” Others spoke of experiences that allowed them to engage with clients, attend meetings, and contribute meaningfully to the host organisation’s operations. These experiences enriched their understanding of professional norms and workplace dynamics.

Many students reported an increase in self-awareness and career clarity. The internship provided space to reflect on personal strengths, values, and long-term goals. For one participant, this shift was transformational: “I realised I could do something meaningful and be happy, not just chase money. Now, I’m seriously considering working in the nonprofit sector.”

Student Recommendations for Program Enhancement

In addition to highlighting the benefits of their placement experience, students also offered constructive suggestions for enhancing the internship program, particularly in better preparing international students for workplace norms in Australia. Several participants recommended that basic practical training be provided prior to the placement, especially on how to navigate everyday professional scenarios. This included guidance on communicating lateness, engaging in informal office interactions, or interpreting subtle workplace expectations.

Focus group discussions highlighted the emotional challenges of adapting to unfamiliar environments. They expressed feelings of anxiety and uncertainty about expectations, as well

as difficulty understanding how to “fit in” culturally, noting that they “didn’t know what to expect,” were unsure “what the boundaries would be like,” and at times “felt outside of the culture.” To better support international students, focus group participants suggested that pre-placement sessions include more scenario-based activities and real-life examples. This approach, they believed, would offer clearer insight into behavioural norms and communication strategies in Australian workplaces.

Additional recommendations included:

- Providing additional support for students with no prior work experience
- Promoting the internship program earlier in students’ academic journey to build awareness and preparedness
- Exploring ways to offset financial stress, such as offering modest subsidies or coordinating with host organisations to accommodate students’ part-time work schedules

Although students acknowledged that financial support may be difficult to implement, the conflict between unpaid internships and paid work obligations remains a significant concern for many.

Implications

WIL plays an important role in introducing students to real-world work environments and is particularly valued by international students seeking to gain relevant experience in their host country to enhance post-study employment prospects. This study set out to explore the specific challenges international students face in securing and undertaking WIL placements, and how tailored institutional support—such as the UniSA Business 6S internship model—can help address them. Findings revealed a recurring set of structural barriers, including limited local networks, lack of Australian work experience, and visa constraints. Interestingly, this study’s findings diverge from prior research, which has typically emphasised language and cultural barriers as primary obstacles (e.g., Jackson, 2017). In contrast, the international students in this study identified structural and systemic barriers—such as limited networks and visa restrictions—as the more significant impediments to placement access and success, suggesting a shifting landscape of international student placement experiences.

The UniSA Business 6S internship model provided a structured framework that may support students’ confidence, professional development, and overall success during their internships. Through structured support, reflective practices, and dual mentorship, students reported enhanced self-confidence, professional identity, and readiness for employment. Survey and focus group responses also indicated that students gained meaningful workplace exposure, improved their understanding of Australian professional culture, and developed both technical and transferable skills. These outcomes closely aligned with students’ initial hopes for their placement experience, including gaining industry insight, building networks, and increasing employability.

Importantly, the internship experience supported students' transition into the workforce, with some even securing employment offers. Students also valued the opportunity to engage in applied tasks, receive mentorship, and gain clarity about their career interests. These findings reinforce the value of student-centred and inclusive WIL programs that go beyond technical or discipline-specific skills acquisition to foster professional growth and adaptability. To further enhance outcomes for international students, institutions should consider:

- Expanding access to culturally and linguistically inclusive pre-placement training,
- Promoting earlier awareness of WIL opportunities,
- Strengthening partnerships with local industry to increase placement access,
- Addressing financial and visa-related barriers through advocacy and support initiatives.

Conclusion

Overall, this study underscores the value of a structured, student-centred approach to WIL for international students. By addressing structural barriers, enhancing pre-placement preparation, and fostering supportive university–industry partnerships, institutions can significantly improve placement outcomes and long-term employability for this cohort. The UniSA Business internship program, underpinned by the 6S model, demonstrates that with the right scaffolding, international students cannot only overcome workplace challenges but also thrive, gaining critical skills, confidence, and clarity in their career paths. The insights generated offer practical guidance for universities and host organisations aiming to build more inclusive, equitable, and impactful placement experiences. As global education continues to evolve, embedding inclusive and responsive practices in WIL programs will be essential to ensuring all students—regardless of background—can gain meaningful, career-shaping workplace experiences.

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Credit Statement

Zhifang Wu: conceptualization, methodology, data analysis, writing (original draft), supervision, validation, funding acquisition; Jinhua Cui: data collection, data analysis, writing (results); Ganesh Keremane: literature review, questionnaire design, writing (reviewing and editing).

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