

Climbing the Ladder of WIL Success: A University Teachers' Model for In-Curricular Industry-Partnered Learning Uplift

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Abstract

Multiple frameworks are available to differentiate various aspects and levels of work-integrated learning (WIL) across the university curriculum. While these add to the narrative for expert WIL practitioners, they tend to support a higher-level view not readily accessible or immediately understandable to all university educators. This paper introduces a ladder-styled framework for evaluating industry-partnered learning (IPL) integration within courses. When used as an artefact to stimulate analysis and conversation with university educators in an IPL professional development workshop in an Australian university, the framework was well received. This positive reception inspired a round of analysis as part of the first stage of an educational design research project. Analysis of the now titled “Thornton’s IPL Ladder (Ladder)” offered in this paper illustrates how it is positioned in relation to other existing WIL classification frameworks and models. The Ladder contributes towards supporting academics to benchmark the IPL composition within their own courses and to consider the possibility and appropriateness for moving a course to a higher IPL level. The next phase of the project aims for maturation of the Ladder through further stages of testing and stakeholder input.

Keywords: Work-integrated learning, industry-partnered learning, industry engagement, academic development.

Introduction

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is a widely used term. It is applied to a range of teaching approaches and strategies that integrate subject theory with the practice of work through specifically designed activities (Dean, 2023; Patrick et al., 2008). WIL offers a way to scaffold pedagogy that involves students, higher education institutions, and external partners via authentic experiences designed into the curriculum (Zegwaard et al., 2023). Most university degrees incorporate some form of WIL and WIL features as a significant element within institutional strategy and promotional messaging (Jackson, 2024).

Educational approaches which are labelled as either work-integrated or industry-partnered typically have significant crossover. This paper recognises industry-partnered learning (IPL) as a broad concept that encapsulates WIL, while acknowledging that IPL can also include minor industry-partnered elements or activities within a course that may not meet

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a university's definition of WIL. WIL, in turn, can range from structured in-curricular experiences through to industry-embedded placements and internships. The focus of this paper is not on placement WIL, as "an activity which takes place outside of the classroom" (Rowe et al., 2012, p. 248), but on non-placement WIL (Dean, Eady et al., 2020; Dean & Rook, 2023) and other in-curricular IPL experiences. This focus recognises the type of courses that are primarily designed for on-campus delivery and have some form of authentic student-to-industry experience.

University teachers who seek guidance for their in-curricular IPL course design and/or delivery can refer to their institutional resources, the published literature, or call upon WIL-focussed organisations such as the Australian Collaborative Education Network (ACEN). In the literature, the multiple WIL models and frameworks available to provide guidance are arguably more accessible to WIL practitioners and experts who have WIL-focussed roles, compared to teaching academics with broad competing priorities. An academic entering the field wishing to advance their IPL practice within their disciplinary contexts might not know where to begin unpacking or building a WIL or IPL course. This includes understanding the expectations around the type and density of industry-partnered activities required.

The literature around work-based higher education curricula offers typologies, matrix models, and comparison categories of activities across a typical degree (e.g., Bosco & Ferns, 2014; Calway, 2006; Dean, Yanamandram et al., 2020; Kaider et al., 2017; Oliver, 2015; Rowe et al., 2012). This discussion paper adds to the WIL literature by introducing an in-curricular IPL classification ladder, "Thornton's IPL Ladder", presented as a straightforward model to offer to university teachers. It is intended that teachers who are required to teach WIL or IPL courses might engage with the model as part of profession development to foster granular consideration of the IPL experiences offered in their own courses. Inherent is the potential for teachers to question the level of industry engagement currently designed into their course/s and to consider whether uplifting their course/s to the next level is suitable and/or possible. "Thornton's IPL Ladder (the Ladder)" introduced in this paper has an intentional IPL focus. Designed by a practicing academic, it differentiates the levels of industry engagement from academic perspectives for on-campus higher education IPL and non-placement WIL approaches. The Ladder forms a small contribution to the sector-wide work required to investigate "the impact of different types of WIL across disciplines and course levels ... [to inform] resource allocation and evidence-based curriculum standards for co-designing and implementing quality, inclusive WIL and associated measures for evaluation and benchmarking at subject, qualification and institutional levels" (Jackson, 2024, p. 5).

As an artefact to illustrate progressive levels of IPL in a course, "Thornton's IPL Ladder" was used in an IPL professional development workshop with business-discipline academics and learning designers at RMIT University in 2023. Positive reception led to preparations for an educational design research project, with Stage 1 involving the Easterday, Rees Lewis and Gerber (2016, p. 127) phases of "Focus and Understand Study". That is, to determine the project scope and key goals, the first stage involves enhanced understanding of the Ladder in

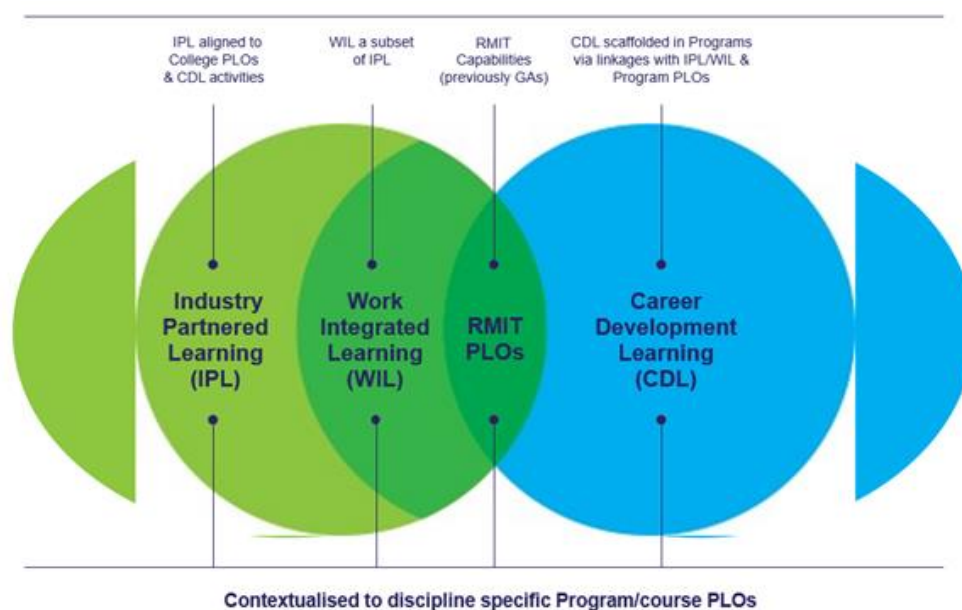
relation to other available WIL frameworks, to inform the research design and the human ethics committee application prior to formal data collection with stakeholder participants.

WIL/IPL and University Teaching

Navigating the WIL pedagogy and terminology can be confusing for those at the coalface of teaching, and likewise for IPL. For WIL that is delivered within the curriculum, universities use different terminology, such as non-placement WIL (Kay et al., 2022; Rook & Dean, 2023), on-campus WIL (Rowe et al., 2012), embedded learning, embedded WIL (Bosco & Ferns, 2014; Dean, Yanamandram et al., 2020), cooperative education, and applied WIL learning (Dean, Yanamandram et al., 2020). These and other terms are frequently closely associated and often overlap.

RMIT University provides an example of how one institution positions WIL in relation to associated terminology (Russell et. al, 2023). Figure 1 illustrates WIL as encompassing generic capability/attributes or work-ready driven learning (indicated as PLOs or program/degree learning outcomes). It also positions WIL as encapsulating part of career development learning, or as sometimes termed career-partnered learning or career exploration (Wood et al., 2020). In turn, WIL is itself encompassed by the broader concept of industry-partnered learning (IPL), which RMIT University defines as a “key mode of learning [that] centres around partnership with industry, infusing classroom and workplace-based learning that is relevant, active, authentic and employability focused” (Russell et. al, 2023, p. 2). Importantly, RMIT University adds that IPL “sharpens the focus on industry-informed and co-designed class-based learning” (Russell et al., 2023, p. 1).

Figure 1: *IPL, WIL, and associated terminology at RMIT University (reproduced with permission from Leoni Russell, WIL and Employability Lead, RMIT University)*



University WIL educators can experience various barriers when building (or unpacking) the IPL and/or WIL composition of their courses. Lloyd et al. (2022) discuss tensions that teaching academics experience when introducing WIL into historically theoretical courses. These teachers may have a restricted understanding of WIL terms or concepts, or a perception of WIL as superficially applied in higher education, or they may have restricted access to the time, the professional development, and/or the specialist support required to develop their skills and knowledge for embedding WIL (Lloyd et al., 2022). Milliken et al. (2021) highlight issues around addressing WIL in an already crowded curriculum. They recommend support for teachers on how WIL can be embedded into the design of a course. Patrick et al. (2008) highlight the tensions between academic workload constraints and limited institutional support, which directly impact university teachers' work in organising and sustaining their WIL courses.

Such issues and challenges are not new, as they have been experienced by academics upon the introduction of other contemporary teaching strategies. Any pedagogical shift can add to “wear and tear” or “fatigue” when university teachers face repeated requests to change pedagogical practice (Kinchin et al., 2016, p. 2), for example, being directed to move to a blended learning model of purposeful mixing on-campus and online learning. Shifting to blended learning can initiate challenges in relation to the time and effort of designing and delivering a new curriculum model (Douglas et al., 2014), or teachers may grapple with notions of what low, medium, and high impact blends comprise (Alammary et al., 2014).

The significance of WIL and IPL teaching can have national level implications. The final report of the Australian Universities Accord (Australian Universities Accord Panel, 2024) notes that to equip students with the skillsets needed for their careers, universities require “skills-integrated curriculum design, industry partnerships, work-integrated learning, and continuous improvements to course delivery” (p. 84). The report emphasises that, besides contemporary knowledge in industry practices, university teachers require suitable professional development to deliver quality educational experiences. The IPL Ladder shared in this paper offers a straightforward model to use in WIL/IPL professional development workshops, as a stimulus for university teachers to consider the level of industry engagement in their course make-up and to consider potential for improvements or uplift. The Ladder is discussed after first discussing several existing WIL models and frameworks.

Analysis of several WIL models/frameworks

Investigation of the WIL literature over the past two decades presents multiple WIL models, of which 10 are analysed here. Some of these models are offered in a framework or classification context, including Calway (2006), Rook and Dean (2023), and Dean, Yanamandram et al. (2020). Calway (2006) is the earliest framework/classification model analysed, and within the paper made a call for WIL to be expanded as an education philosophy. Others offer a matrix-styled model, by quadrant or other purposeful mapping, including Rowe et al. (2012), Dean and Rook (2023), Oliver (2015), Kaider et al. (2017), and Young et al. (2017). Finally, some authors offer a ladder-styled progression model with suggested activity levels and potential movement between levels, such as Dean, Yanamandram et al. (2020), Rankin-

Starcevic et al. (2021), and Bosco and Ferns (2014). Each of these 10 models (note: Dean, Yanamandram et al. (2020) is counted once but featured twice), were analysed in relation to (1) presentation and key features (as perceived by the authors as university teachers), and (2) non-placement WIL or IPL contexts, and are summarised in Tables 1, 2, and 3 below.

Table 1: *WIL models presented as classification frameworks.*

WIL Classification frameworks		
Paper	Presentation and key features	Non-placement WIL/IPL contexts
Calway (2006)	WIL features are mapped over two tables: (a) “Expectations for stakeholders” (students, institutions, employers), and (b) “Group Options and Criteria Analysis”, which includes a range of features, e.g., length of placement, level of supervision, role of student.	Presents multiple delivery modes, including placement and non-placement, across educational sectors. The in-class WIL/IPL options include “project-based” (positioned as not being real work experience) and “contextual learning” (case studies brought into class).
Rook and Dean (2023)	“Non-placement work-integrated learning (NPWIL)” * is classified across two tables: (a) Examples of NPWIL by title and description, (b) Examples of NPWIL in actions (quite detailed application case examples).	Table (a) lists nine NPWIL* examples: consulting, creative studio work, hack-a-thon, incubator, industry or community project, practice clinics, simulated WIL, performances, and commissioned work. Several of these are expanded with case examples in Table (b).
Dean, Yanamandram et al. (2020)	This “Work-Integrated Learning Curriculum Classification (WILCC) Framework” is included in Table 3, given its ladder-styled features.	See Table 3.

*Note: The Rook and Dean (2023) chapter recognises non-placement work-integrated learning (NPWIL) as a sub-set of WIL that does not have a workplace location. Industry partners collaborate through meaningful and purposeful work to provide feedback via mentoring and supervision to learners. This can occur across any space from single classroom to international locations via online mode.

Table 2: *WIL models presented in a matrix style (by quadrant or other purposeful mapping)*

Matrix-styled models		
Paper	Presentation and key features	Non-placement WIL contexts
Rowe et al. (2012)	A quadrant model which maps “placement” and “other WIL activities” against “benefits” and “drawbacks”.	Identifies the benefits and drawbacks to non-placement WIL.
Dean & Rook (2023)	A two-part “non-placement work-based learning (NPWBL)” ** model: (a) Table of NPWBL examples by title and description, (b) Four-quadrant matrix maps the dual continuums of low to high “industry participation” against “work literacies” (for work) to “work practices” (as work).	The table (a) lists 12 NPWBL** examples, e.g., case-based learning, design studies, lab work, mentoring, simulation-based learning, Q&A with industry. The matrix (b) is populated by examples of NPWBL from the table.
Oliver (2015)	A four-quadrant matrix which maps “authenticity” (the degree that the activity resembles professional work) against “proximity” (the degree to which each learning environment resembles professional contexts).	Non-placement WIL aligns to the upper-left quadrant, where activities have a moderate to high level of authenticity, with low to moderate proximity dependant on the level of reality able to be simulated in the educational environment.
Kaider et al. (2017)	Model presented in two parts: (a) A 3x3 matrix model is built upon Oliver’s (2015) matrix model, but with an assessment focus. It maps low, medium, and high “authenticity” (the degree the assessment resembles professional practice) against low, medium, and high “proximity” (the degree the assessment environment resembles a real workplace or with real practitioners). (b) A three-column table of authentic learning activity and assessment examples.	The table (b) is populated with examples of placement and non-placement types of WIL scaffolded over a degree and with a progression of industry involvement. The first two columns (early and mid-degree) include some non-placement/in-curricular WIL examples, e.g., case studies, simulations, practice clinics, projects or problem-based learning with industry partners.
Young et al. (2017)	A large, complex schematic presents a multi-segment radiating array of factors for enhancing employability outcomes in an industry-oriented course. With multiple point of detail, the small font is difficult to read even when enlarged. A matrix-styled function cross-maps several WIL, IPL, and CDL themes with activity examples. Each activity example is colour-coded for intensity of proximity and authenticity.	One quarter of the model is expanded in the paper to reveal placement and non-placement WIL/IPL, with non-placement options of “industry input”, “industry inspired projects”, and “learning theory through real world problems”. Each option is supported by largely generic examples (e.g., “live case study” for the third option above).

**This Dean and Rook (2023) article surfaces non-placement work-based learning (NPWBL) as different to non-placement work-integrated learning (NPWIL), in that its activities such as case studies provide broader access to work-relevant activities without requiring extended physical placement in real work environments.

Table 3: *WIL models presented in ladder style.*

Ladder-styled WIL progression model		
Paper	Presentation and key features	Non-placement WIL/IPL contexts
Dean, Yanam-andram et al. (2020)	This ladder-styled classification framework has a progression of WIL types from “co-curricular WIL” (not credit bearing) to “foundational WIL” (in-curricular styled), to “embedded WIL” (simulated or real experiences not extending across entire course), and “applied WIL” (e.g., internships, significant industry projects), to “professional WIL” (projects or placements over a sustained period).	Examples of non-placement WIL are offered in the classifications of “foundational” WIL, e.g., authentic case studies, career development modules, and “embedded WIL”, e.g., workplace simulations, role play, small industry projects.
Rankin-Starcevic et al. (2021)	Shares an earlier model (a) of the ladder table offered in Dean, Yanam-andram et al. (2020) above. Also offers a second table (b), which provides an example of WIL applied across the curriculum for the Bachelor of Primary Education.	Similar to Dean, Yanam-andram et al. (2020) above (a), but also provides applied examples (b) including non-placement WIL, e.g., designing school resources and designing a teaching unit.
Bosco & Ferns (2014)	Similar to Oliver (2015) and Kaider et al. (2017), the “authentic assessment framework” is based on a matrix mapping of nil through to high level of “authenticity” of professional activity against nil to high “proximity” to the workplace (educational, to virtual, to workplace settings). Dual ladder columns guide progression from a non-authentic or non-WIL course task to a mid-level authenticity to a high-level authenticity, with examples in each.	The framework illustrates how non-placement WIL can be approached from the educational setting, through virtual means and authentic assessments. For example, case studies, simulation, presentation to a consumer group.

Across the papers which offer the models and frameworks analysed above, the themes of academic support and teacher professional development are not always prioritised, although some do explicitly talk to these themes. Young et al. (2017) discuss academic capacity building for WIL curriculum re-design using their complex radiating, matrix-styled model. With a noted increase in WIL courses, Young et al. (2017) designed and promoted a WIL academic champions approach, to improve university teachers’ understanding of WIL, increase teacher adoption of WIL teaching methods, and to help teachers to surface WIL learning activities from the hidden curriculum. The authors credited the academic-centric leadership approach as sustainable and scalable with an increasing number of WIL champions engaged in skill development activities (Young et al., 2017).

Dean and Rook (2023) couple their “NPWBL” (non-placement work-based learning) matrix model with reflective prompts for educators to determine their intentions for WIL in their course/s. These prompts include considerations for whether their students “practice as work or learn for work” and if industry partners are “to be involved over a sustained period or through one-off activities ... or events” (Dean & Rook, 2023, p. 951). Working though these

prompts allows educators to consider where on the matrix to orient their course and to reflect upon which WIL examples they most relate to. In another publication, Dean et al. (2023) share an academic perspective of desiring “greater access to staff who have expertise in designing WIL activities and programs, as well as [access to] professionals in career development learning to help develop and teach into WIL experiences” (p. 150).

“Thornton’s IPL Ladder”

In this section, we present the original “Thornton’s IPL Ladder” (stylised for publication) as a model for in-curricular WIL evaluation and potential uplift, along with some explanatory notes.

Figure 2 : “Thornton’s IPL Ladder”



“Thornton’s IPL Ladder” (Figure2) offers a way to evaluate in-curricular IPL features in a university course. The Ladder signals the potential to advance a course through to another

level and composition of industry-partnered student experiences. The sections (or rungs) of the Ladder include:

- **Level 0. Zero IPL:** No intentionally designed IPL activity is offered in the course.
- **Level 1. Base in-curricular IPL:** Contains at least one industry-contextualised activity designed into the curriculum (e.g., an industry supplied case study or data to support an in-class activity).
- **Level 2. Light in-curricular IPL:** A light touch industry-partnered approach, but more substantive than Level 1 (e.g., around a quarter of the course activities might be directly IPL), and includes a live interaction with an industry representative.
- **Level 3. Moderate in-curricular IPL:** Relevant industry connections within several weeks of the course (e.g., approximately half of the course activities are IPL). Some live interaction with industry, plus at least one assessment links directly to IPL experiences or contexts.
- **Level 4. Advanced in-curricular IPL:** Relevant industry connections in most weeks (e.g., IPL evident in over half to three-quarters of the course). Multiple live interactions with industry, plus more than one assessment links directly to IPL experiences. Here the course is peppered with IPL, with explicit industry links in most of the activities and assessments.
- **Level 5. Maximum in-curricular IPL possible before external placement:** Strong live industry context underpinning course-wide contexts, activities, and assessments (e.g., students working on-campus on a project with a live client across the length of a course).
- For IPL beyond Level 5, this occurs outside of the classroom as placement WIL, such as external internships with host industry providers.

The Ladder, intentionally designed as a teacher-friendly resource, is different to the existing WIL models analysed. It focusses upon on-campus, in-curricular IPL as a separate entity compared to models that incorporate both placement and non-placement WIL, for example, the Calway (2006) and Rowe et al. (2012) classification frameworks. The Ladder lacks much of the complexity of those analysed, due to its linear progression without the cross-mapping multiple features otherwise found in the matrix-styled models of Oliver (2015) or Kaider et al. (2017) or the radiating model by Young et al. (2017). Because of this simplicity, the Ladder does not compete with existing models, but rather it offers a gateway tool for academic engagement and understanding of the IPL compositions of a course.

The structure of “Thornton’s IPL Ladder” allows for open conversations initiated by academics as the agents of their own courses. Such conversations can lead university educators to question the IPL composition and determine if their course has the potential to uplift to the next rung on the ladder.

Discussion

The Thornton's IPL Ladder discussed in this paper offers university educators an accessible entry point into WIL and IPL conversations, with the potential to lead to introducing other published WIL frameworks at a subsequent stage. The Ladder has an intentional linear progression, of increasingly richer IPL compositions at each level. A subsequent tool to introduce to university teachers might include one of the more complex progression type models on offer, for example, the Bosco and Ferns (2014) or the Rankin-Starcevic et al. (2021) progression models. The Young et al. (2017) radiating model offers an alternative next stage tool, particularly for guiding teachers who have identified as wanting to uplift their WIL course to the next IPL rung on the ladder but would like a course activity centric model to start making IPL activity choices. Presenting the Young et al. (2017) model might help academics to understand and invest in the value of industry-oriented approaches within in-curricula IPL, after benefiting from the use of the gateway tool of [Name]'s Ladder in initial stages. Professional development workshops that position academic staff as central to in-curricular IPL decision-making can maximise learning from scaffolded IPL modelling.

Students' authentic learning experiences in class-based or non-placement WIL courses are of higher importance today than ever before (Australian Universities Accord Panel, 2024). Many universities have reputations and/or develop bold promotional strategies around the quality of their industry partnerships (Jackson, 2024) and "career ambitions are the main reason why people choose university" (Kinash, 2021, p. 7). University student numbers have been on the rise for many years, where "overall, enrolments have increased 45 per cent since 2008" (Universities Australia, 2022, p. 33). Such trends are likely to continue with views that "the system will need to more than double the number of Commonwealth supported students in universities from 860,000 currently to 1.8 million by 2050" (Australian Universities Accord Panel, 2024, p. 7). Growth in student numbers signals that industry-partnered course experiences will be required at scale. Traditional individual internships cannot alone carry the increased demand, due to multiple factors such as cost, increased competition for places, disadvantage to some cohorts, and limited space within full curricula (Milliken et al., 2021), and typically WIL students requiring more support from an already stretched system (Kay et al., 2019). In-curricular IPL experiences have an important role in not only taking some of this weight, but also in preparing students to be ready to take full learning advantage from their eventual work placements.

The uplift suggested in "Thornton's IPL Ladder" is dependent on multiple course factors, and may be built gradually over time to reach their desired level. Conversely, maintaining an achieved IPL level will likely require regular and rigorous review, evaluation, and refreshing of content. Academic management should facilitate teacher access to staff who have expertise in designing WIL courses to aid this ongoing process (Dean, 2023). Such efforts are well-placed given that students who graduate with two to three industry or WIL experiences leave university with deeper technical competence, higher confidence, and a greater breadth of networks (Leong & Kavanagh, 2013). For degrees where students are expected to spend some dedicated time with industry such as work-based learning (Calway, 2006) or applied WIL

(Dean, Yanamandram et al., 2020), undertaking a mid-to-high level IPL course design (on the Ladder) can be the ideal preparation to build confidence in young people before their individual WIL learning episodes or external internships, which is noted as the natural progress for a student above Level 5 on the Ladder.

Conclusion and next steps

This paper presents a simple model for progressively rich industry-partnered features within a higher education course. The “Thornton’s IPL Ladder” can be used by university teachers to unpack and/or uplift their course/s in relation to the composition of industry-partnered learning activities and assessments for students. The Ladder is designed to help academics to take control of what IPL elements they implement into their on-campus courses, and to consider the potential for enriching the IPL elements to reach the next level. The Ladder is positioned as a gateway model for which other models can be subsequently introduced. Given academics have identified challenges around developing WIL activities and that they would benefit from both the “support of specialists in WIL pedagogy” and “practical resources for academics to embed WIL activities” (Dean et al., 2023, pp. 150-151), the practical model offered in this paper adds a gateway resource for scaffolding an agentic response from educators to determine their own course industry-partnered needs.

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Work Integrated Learning

in Practice

About the Journal

WIL in Practice exists to disseminate good practice and learnings in work integrated learning (WIL), forming a valuable resource for NAFEA members and the broader WIL community. Publishing research and other suitable publications from academics, administrators and others whose interests align with the practice and administration of WIL, the journal will add to, and enhance, the existing body of knowledge that currently exists about WIL in all its various forms.

Early-career and emerging researchers and writers are also encouraged to submit their work. WIL in Practice provides an outlet for professionals to publish in a variety of formats.

WIL in Practice is supported by the National Association of Field Experience Administrators Inc. (NAFEA). WIL in Practice aims to be a high-quality and internationally recognised journal, publishing research and other suitable manuscripts from academics, administrators and the broader community whose interests align with the practice and administration of WIL. The journal will:

- Provide a welcoming, supportive and educative environment for authors at all levels to publish quality work
- Meaningfully contribute to the distribution of knowledge and professional development of WIL practitioners and researchers
- Publish at least once annually
- Take no action or inaction that is contrary to the values or directions of the NAFEA Executive Management Committee
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