EDITORIAL
The WIL to Thrive: A Brave New World

ONDINE BRADURY[1]
Editor-In-Chief
RICKY TUNNY[2]
Managing Editor
[1] Swinburne University of Technology, Victoria, Australia
[2] Queensland University of Technology, Queensland, Australia

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In this special edition dedicated to the proceedings of the *2023 NAFEA Conference*, this issue of *WIL in Practice* delves into topics surrounding the Universities Accord, the National WIL Strategy and the multifaceted challenges associated with the ever-evolving landscape of work-integrated learning (WIL). The NAFEA Conference sessions discussed issues such as resource allocation for WIL, the empowerment of refugee students through WIL, and the journey of professional identity formation during postgraduate training. With a strong emphasis on innovation, the conference explored virtual WIL, co-designed initiatives for business students, and the development of an open access WIL journal. Equitable access to WIL, speed-networking events to enhance student-industry connections, and the impact of international opportunities like the New Colombo Plan (Australian Government, n.d.) were also key highlights. The conference examined the link between practical experience and employability, the role of coaching in fostering self-reflection, and the management of risks associated with clinical placements. This edition also features a viewpoint on paid WIL activities in engineering, business, and law, along with a research roundup to keep WIL practitioners informed of the latest developments.

Recent discussions in Australia around the Universities Accord Final Report (2024) and the National WIL Strategy (2014) highlight the growing recognition of WIL as a critical component of higher education, both nationally and internationally. However, with this recognition comes a set of challenges and opportunities that must be addressed to ensure equitable opportunities for students as well as the successful integration and sustainability of WIL programs across Australia. The National WIL Strategy presents a framework for embedding WIL into the fabric of higher education to bridge the gap between university learning and its real-world application. It calls for aligning WIL programs with national and international standards for higher education quality, ensuring that students not only gain practical experience but there are improvements in graduate outcomes and "employability" to benefit the economy and strengthen university-employer partnerships. The alignment between higher education and industry is crucial for maintaining the integrity of our education system while equipping students with the skills and knowledge they need to thrive in a global workforce.

The success of WIL initiatives is significantly impacted without adequate funding and resourcing, both from government and institutions. This includes financial support for students to alleviate the burden of participating in WIL and subsidies for employers who provide valuable placements. Without this financial support, WIL programs risk becoming inaccessible to many students, particularly those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds or those studying in fields where WIL opportunities are less readily available. By addressing the challenges of funding, risk management, equitable access, and practitioner support, we can ensure that WIL remains a cornerstone of our education system. As we look to the future, let us continue to build strong, innovative partnerships that will prepare our students for the challenges and opportunities of the modern workforce.

The following insights, drawn from the recent NAFEA conference abstracts, highlight the evolving perspectives and key considerations in WIL programs. The abstracts also emphasise the importance of innovative partnerships, addressing large-scale implementation challenges, and exploring new models for WIL student engagement. As many WIL programs have become large-scale, there is a need to address some of the barriers. Hannon (2023) discussed the challenges of large-scale WIL delivery, the benefits of self-sourced placements, and the use of students as partners in the process. Resource challenges also drove university-based WIL innovation, with McMahon's (2023) speed-networking events showcasing scalable solutions for enhancing student-industry connections. From an equity perspective, we need to consider the scaffolding that is required to support all students, as not all students are confident or have the skill set to negotiate their own WIL experiences or to interact with industry partners to secure opportunities. Henry (2023) highlighted the need to understand student demographics to enhance student experiences, particularly in a context where navigating legal and administrative complexities are ever-growing. It is also required so that we understand what support services and resources are needed to ensure successful participation and outcomes for the students. Issues of equity and access are now central to the Universities Accord's mission to increase student participation in vocational and higher education.

Equity and access remain persistent challenges, with several abstracts at the conference addressing the systemic barriers that hinder participation for marginalised students. While virtual WIL, as discussed by Price (2023) and Prenzler (2023), offers some solutions, deeper social inequities such as racism, ableism and homo/bi/trans/ace-phobia require more robust institutional responses. Resourcing of WIL is key to engaging students from all backgrounds and breaking down some of the barriers that prevent access and participation. WIL is acknowledged as a pedagogy that is vital in developing professional skills enhancing employability, and fostering community engagement, while considering the unique challenges faced by certain cohorts (Azad. 2023).

The importance of WIL's role in developing cultural competency and professional identity reinforces the need to ensure equitable access and participation. Cultural competency and

professional identity were explored at the conference, with Winslade and McCarthy (2023) highlighting the impact of international experiences, and Harrison (2023) emphasising the importance of motivation and socialisation in professional development. Sear's (2023) longitudinal study provides further evidence of the importance of WIL by engaging students in practical teaching experiences in schools, which enhanced their ability to link educational theory with teaching practice. Grant (2023) introduced at La Trobe University a three-phase Graduate Employability Cycle of Learning, incorporating the Experiential Learning Cycle, to align undergraduate learning with industry needs and develop employability skills through practical experience. The criticality of WIL means we need to be cognisant of and responsive to issues of equity.

Providing equitable access to rural and remote placements continues to be a challenge. A panel session at the conference explored the potential accommodation solutions, financial support, and the importance of social engagement and interprofessional education during WIL experiences (Bickers, 2023). The discussion highlighted that even within Australia, there are opportunities for students to gain valuable experiences to grow their cultural competence. Despite resource constraints, institutions are finding innovative ways to enhance WIL experiences, with a strong emphasis on developing cultural competency and professional identity.

Institutions not only need to ensure equitable access to WIL, but they also need to provide quality-assured experiences. There are many challenges in evaluating WIL programs, given their diversity. Young's (2023) WIL Evaluation Framework (WEF) proposes a sector-wide benchmark, suggesting a shift towards macro-level evaluations that accommodate varied WIL experiences across institutions. Similarly, the emphasis on quality supervision and standardised training was highlighted by Connor and Gerrard's (2023) project at Deakin University, which created a centralised resource for clinical supervisors.

Another key theme at the conference was the increasing focus on risk management, particularly in high-stake environments like clinical placements. Erben's (2023) development of the Clinical Education Strategy and Risk (CESAR) framework at the University of Melbourne exemplifies this proactive approach, aligning with international standards to ensure student and stakeholder safety. Further risks were highlighted when there is no standardisation. In Osman's study (2023), they found that while many processes are in place, inconsistencies in management across States within Australia present challenges that need addressing.

In addition to the generative discussions stemming from the conference, we are proud to introduce the articles included in this issue of *WIL in Practice*. The articles from this issue emphasise collaboration and an entrepreneurial spirit in the WIL space. The work that is outlined by Young et al., (2024), and Thornton and Colasante (2024) showcase how crucial it is to bridge the chasm between higher education institutions, industry, government, and community organisations. These collaborations are essential for creating meaningful WIL opportunities that

benefit the students, the university and the many industry and school partnerships that we rely upon for WIL to be successful. The viewpoint from Grey and Apps (2024) poses an alternative option to enable students in engineering, business and law to be paid during their WIL activities. Without financial support schemes for students, only those with the means will be able to participate. Finally, the research-roundup from Walsh and Lloyd (2024) provides us with a range of global discussions that have implications for WIL in Australian contexts. Collectively, we thank those who have contributed to this issue. Their work continues to foster the ingenuity that is inherent in WIL through their innovation, drive and willingness to continue to develop and grow the WIL space.

References

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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.

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- Provide a welcoming, supportive and educative environment for authors at all levels to publish quality work
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