

From Placement to Partnership: Reframing WIL Practice

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Introduction

Framing the Special Issue: Partnerships in and for WIL

Partnerships sit at the heart of work-integrated learning (WIL). Whether enacted through placements, projects, simulations, co-designed curricula, or community-engaged learning, WIL depends on relationships that extend beyond the boundaries of any single institution or sector (Kay et al, 2019). At its best, WIL is not something delivered *to* students or *for* industry, but something created *with* partners who bring different forms of expertise, expectations, and investment. Yet while partnerships are frequently invoked as essential to WIL, the work of building, sustaining, and re-imagining them often remains under-examined in practice-focused scholarship (Fransman & Newman, 2019). This special issue of *WIL in Practice* brings partnerships to the foreground. It recognises that partnerships are not static arrangements or transactional agreements, but dynamic, negotiated, and often fragile forms of collaboration (Perry et al., 2022). They require trust, shared purpose, and ongoing care, particularly in increasingly complex higher education and vocational landscapes marked by shifting policy priorities, changing labour markets, and growing expectations of employability and social impact (Lasrado et al., 2024). By centring partnerships as both a practical and conceptual focus, this issue seeks to deepen understandings of how WIL is enacted on the ground, and how partnership work shapes its quality, reach, and sustainability.

The contributions to this special issue examine partnership as both practice and problem, revealing its diversity, complexity, and contested nature across work-integrated learning contexts. Collectively, the papers illuminate partnerships that extend beyond conventional institution-industry arrangements to include cross-institutional collaborations, policy and funding bodies, editorial and scholarly communities, and Indigenous-led, land-based relationships that challenge dominant assumptions about work, value, and contribution. Rather than presenting partnerships as stable or idealised, these contributions foreground partnership as relational, negotiated, and often shaped by power, inequity, and institutional constraint. In doing so, they surface the often-unseen labour, ethical tensions, and acts of care that underpin partnership work in WIL, while also pointing to more inclusive, values-driven, and future-facing ways of understanding who, and what, counts as a partner in learning.

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Importantly, this special issue positions students not merely as recipients of partnership activity, but as active participants within partnership-based learning ecosystems. The contributions highlight approaches that involve students as co-designers, collaborators, and knowledge-builders, while others foreground relational models of learning in which students participate alongside communities, practitioners, and, in some contexts, land itself. Together, these papers challenge traditional, instrumental models of WIL by inviting readers to consider how partnerships might be structured in ways that are not only effective, but also ethical, inclusive, and responsive to diverse learners, contexts, and ways of knowing. Collectively, the papers in this issue offer practice-based insights into how partnerships are initiated, governed, and sustained, as well as how they evolve over time. They provide concrete examples of partnership models, strategies, and lessons learned, while also raising critical questions about power, responsibility, and mutual benefit in WIL. Rather than presenting a single blueprint for ‘successful’ partnerships, this special issue embraces the diversity of partnership practices and encourages reflection on what partnership means in different contexts.

In bringing these contributions together, this special issue aims to support practitioners, administrators, academics, and partners working in and around WIL to reflect on their own partnership practices, learn from others’ experiences, and contribute to a more nuanced and practice-informed understanding of partnerships in action.

Discussion

Why Partnership Work in WIL Matters

The renewed focus on partnerships in WIL is not incidental or coincidental. It reflects a confluence of sector-wide shifts that have made partnership work more visible, more complex, and more consequential than at any previous point. Across higher education, vocational education, and professional learning contexts, WIL is being asked to do more: to prepare graduates for uncertain futures, to respond to rapidly changing labour markets, to support social and civic outcomes, and to demonstrate value to students, employers, institutions, and governments alike (Iliescu et al., 2025; Kiruthika et al., 2024). These heightened expectations place partnerships under increasing pressure, revealing both their centrality, and fragility, to WIL.

In recent years, and particularly post-COVID, WIL has expanded beyond traditional placement-based models to include project-based, simulated, hybrid, and community-engaged forms of learning (Dean & Campbell, 2020). While this diversification has opened new possibilities for access and innovation, it has also intensified the relational work required to design, coordinate, and sustain meaningful learning experiences (Ademuyiwa et al., 2024). Partnerships are no longer peripheral to WIL delivery; they are the infrastructure that enables WIL to function at scale and with quality. Yet many partnership arrangements continue to rely on goodwill, informal relationships, and invisible labour, raising questions about sustainability, equity, and shared responsibility.

At the same time, industry and community partners are navigating their own pressures. Workforce shortages, organisational restructuring, regulatory demands, and changing expectations around supervision and risk have reshaped partners' capacity to engage in WIL. For some, participation is driven by a commitment to professional formation or community contribution; for others, it is increasingly framed through productivity, talent pipelines, or reputational value (Fleming et al., 2018). These differing motivations can create misalignment if partnership purposes are not explicitly negotiated and revisited over time.

Students, too, are experiencing WIL differently. Increasing diversity in student cohorts, including part-time learners, working students, international students, and those balancing caring responsibilities, challenges assumptions about availability, mobility, and access to traditional WIL opportunities (Belando-Montoro et al., 2022). In this context, partnerships that are flexible, inclusive, and attentive to student voice are not optional extras, but essential conditions for equitable participation. There is growing recognition that students must be positioned not only as learners within partnerships, but as contributors to their design, evaluation, and evolution.

Policy and funding environments further sharpen the urgency of this moment. Governments and regulatory bodies are increasingly positioning WIL as a mechanism for employability, skills alignment, and economic recovery (Baichoo & Sjolander, 2025). While this attention has elevated the profile of WIL, it has also introduced new forms of accountability and standardisation that can constrain partnership creativity and responsiveness. Understanding how partnerships are shaped by, and push back against, these structural conditions is therefore critical.

This special issue responds to these intersecting pressures by foregrounding partnership work as a site of practice, learning, and inquiry in its own right. Rather than treating partnerships as background conditions for WIL, it invites closer examination of how they are formed, maintained, challenged, and reimagined in contemporary contexts. By doing so, the issue speaks to a shared moment of recalibration in WIL. A moment in which the future of WIL is inseparable from the quality of the partnerships that sustain it.

Learning from Partnerships: Perspectives from across our Contexts

If this special issue has shown anything, it is that partnership in work-integrated learning is not a static arrangement but an unfolding journey. Our own professional pathways reflect this evolution. In the reflections that follow, we (Denyse and Ange, respectively) turn inward to examine how partnership has been shaped within our contexts. By tracing shifts from transactional beginnings, we can move toward more relational, ecosystem-oriented understandings of collaboration and shared purpose.

The Journey of WIL for Denyse: An Evolving Understanding of Partnerships

The articles included in this special edition broaden how WIL partnerships are conceived and commonly understood. WIL is positioned as a collaborative journey of inquiry, shared purpose, and evolving notions of partnerships.

My own entry into WIL was not intentional or theoretically driven, but rather emerged organically from practice. As a practitioner transitioning into academia, WIL initially felt like a natural extension of supporting students as they prepared to assume professional roles. Over time, and through deeper engagement with WIL scholarship, the distinctions between informal experiential learning and a more intentional, scholarly approach to WIL became clearer. Most notable throughout this process has been the role of remarkable people and relationships. Early collaborations with students and external partners, initially understood as functional or transactional, evolved into reciprocal partnerships rooted in trust, shared learning, and mutual benefit.

As my WIL network expanded to include faculty colleagues, the collegial exchange of ideas strengthened both individual practice and collective capacity. These relationships, in turn, influenced my research efforts which increasingly focused on WIL matters. This evolution of WIL partners and engagement mirrors several of the themes advanced in this issue. The authors collectively demonstrate that relationships drive WIL and that this journey evolves over time. Contributions challenge conventional concepts of partnership by repositioning land as an active co-creator of learning, and by a vision for inclusive academic outlets that support the dissemination of WIL knowledge.

Partnerships in WIL are never fixed. They grow, adapt, and often stretch beyond traditional boundaries. In an increasingly complex landscape, it's our willingness to evolve together that keeps these relationships meaningful and full of possibility. When we embrace new pathways, we create partnerships that not only remain relevant but spark inspiration, innovation, and meaningful learning for all partners.

Partnership as Ecosystem for Ange: Affordances and Tensions in a Transnational University Context

Against this backdrop, reflecting on how partnerships are understood and enacted in different institutional contexts becomes critical. Working within my current professional context, a Sino-English transnational university in China, invites a rethinking of what WIL can be when it is approached as an ecosystem rather than a bounded activity. In this context, learning is not anchored to a single site or format but emerges through relationships across schools, industry, community organisations, outdoor environments, and everyday professional practice. The notion of a 'university without walls' positions education as distributed and relational, shaped by the interplay of people, places, and purposes.

This ecosystem approach affords important possibilities for WIL. It enables more flexible and inclusive forms of participation at a time when traditional placement models are increasingly constrained by scale, regulation, and access. It broadens what counts as legitimate sites of learning, recognising community-based, interdisciplinary, and place-responsive experiences as meaningful WIL. Partnership, in this model, is less about transactional exchange and more about co-construction, with students, educators, and partners collectively shaping learning rather than occupying fixed roles.

At the same time, ecosystem-based partnerships surface significant challenges. When learning occurs across multiple sites and relationships, questions of coherence, recognition, and quality assurance become more complex. The relational labour required to sustain trust and alignment is substantial and often invisible, while formal structures for recognising partner contributions, student learning, and staff workload frequently lag behind the ambitions of this model.

What is often missing, therefore, are shared languages, frameworks, and governance mechanisms capable of holding this complexity without reducing WIL to instrumental or compliance-driven forms. This context reveals partnership not as a neutral mechanism, but as an ethical and political practice through which power, responsibility, and value are negotiated. In this sense, partnership is not simply what enables WIL to operate; it is the site where the possibilities, limits, and future directions of WIL are actively contested and reimaged across diverse institutional and partnership contexts.

Collective Contributions: What this Special Issue Reveals about Partnerships

Across the contributions to this special issue, partnership is neither neutral nor fixed. It is contested, negotiated, and reshaped in response to shifting educational, social, and institutional conditions. Collectively, the papers reveal partnership as both a pedagogical practice and a structural force, capable of reinforcing existing hierarchies or, alternatively, of opening space for more inclusive and future-oriented models of work-integrated learning.

The contribution by Nillsson offers a critical reframing of partnership in work-integrated learning through Indigenous worldviews. Drawing on national experience within Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning Canada's Innovation Hub, the author interrogates dominant Western assumptions about work, deliverables, and mutual benefit that underpin many contemporary frameworks. By positioning the Land itself as partner rather than passive site, the paper reconceptualises reciprocity as relational, ethical, and protocol-driven rather than transactional or productivity-based. In doing so, it reveals how land-based learning is frequently misclassified because institutional definitions privilege formal host organisations and measurable outputs. The author argues that meaningful inclusion requires systemic transformation of funding, assessment, and governance structures—not simply adaptation of Indigenous models to existing criteria. This contribution expands the special issue's understanding of partnership beyond

institutional and industry arrangements, foregrounding Indigenous-led, place-based, and stewardship-centred approaches that challenge whose epistemologies define legitimacy in work-integrated learning.

Building on this conceptual expansion, the contribution by Tunny et al. turns to partnership within the scholarly ecosystem itself, offering a meta-level examination of how knowledge infrastructures are collaboratively constructed. Through a thematic analysis of establishing a new open access journal during the COVID-19 pandemic, the authors illuminate partnership as cross-institutional, relational, and values-driven. Their analysis highlights shared purpose, collegiality, and entrepreneurial resilience as foundational to building an inclusive publishing platform that supports early career and underrepresented scholars. As a counterpoint to prestige-driven and metrics-dominated publishing cultures, the paper positions partnership as a structural intervention in academic knowledge production. Together, these two contributions move the field from redefining partnership conceptually to enacting it structurally, modelling how work-integrated learning can evolve toward more equitable and future-facing practices.

Conclusion

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Taken together, the contributions to this special issue invite a decisive shift in how WIL is understood and enacted. Moving from placement to partnership is not a semantic adjustment; it is a reframing of purpose, responsibility, and power. It asks us to see WIL not as a discrete activity appended to curriculum, but as a relational ecosystem sustained through trust, reciprocity, and shared accountability.

Reframing WIL in this way foregrounds the often-invisible labour required to initiate, nurture, and sustain meaningful collaborations. It also challenges institutions to move beyond compliance-driven metrics toward governance, recognition, and resourcing structures that honour partnership as core academic work. Importantly, it calls for students to be positioned not only as beneficiaries of partnership, but as contributors to its design and evolution.

As the sector navigates uncertainty, expansion, and heightened expectations, the future of WIL will depend less on the proliferation of models and more on the quality of the relationships that underpin them. If partnerships are the infrastructure of WIL, then attending to their ethical, relational, and political dimensions is essential. From placement to partnership, the task ahead is collective and clear: to build WIL practices that are sustainable, inclusive, and capable of evolving with the communities they serve.

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Work Integrated Learning

in Practice

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