Beyond employability: Conceptualising WIL in postgraduate education

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Across many Australian universities there has been adopted a strategic direction around the delivery of work integrated learning (WIL) opportunities to all students across the institution. Some universities have set targets of 100% of students to have engaged in a WIL experience prior to graduation, which includes both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Complementing these strategic directions has also been the introduction of WIL opportunities for higher degree research students. Conceptualisations of WIL need to account for contexts which are not simple transitions from undergraduate learner to the emerging professional and broaden understandings of WIL beyond employability to encompass professional and personal transformation and identity formation. This paper presents a concept of WIL in consideration of postgraduate education drawing upon two studies that have explored WIL in post-graduate learning environments.

Keywords: post-graduate education, higher degree research, professional identity, transformative learning

WIL as pedagogy

Work integrated learning (WIL) has often been conceptualised as a process of preparing students for the world of work. WIL has been demonstrated to provide benefits for students to enhance employability, work-readiness, professional identity, and 'soft skills', making the transition from university to the workplace more successful (Ferns, Smith, Russell, & Cretchley, 2014; Jackson, 2015). Such models of WIL, and most research in this area, has tended to focus on the experience of undergraduate students with little professional experience, or what may be considered an emerging professional (Stewart, 2017). WIL in these contexts is powerful in providing graduates with experiences and understandings of the workplace that allow them to translate and transfer the knowledge of the university to the practice of the workplace. However, in the postgraduate setting such is not necessarily the case. With universities moving towards strategic goals of all students having a WIL experience as part of their study, greater attention needs to be provided to what these experiences may be like and what benefits may be evident for postgraduate students, who often have existing workplace experience.

Work integrated learning is not just a process of students engaging in the workplace in the hope of osmotic development of employability, it is a pedagogical approach that aims to maximise learning in and through experience (Smith et al., 2009; Yorke, 2006). There has been a significant amount of research and academic writing suggesting that employability is a significant outcome from WIL (see, for example, Ferns & Lilly, 2015). However, an employability discourse of higher education outcomes is not politically neutral and, at times, obscures the socially transformative nature of education (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). WIL, as a pedagogical approach, provides opportunities for students to learn, and transform, in and through practice and experience, building on models of experiential learning (Clark, Threeton, & Ewing, 2010; Kolb, 2015). Experiential learning provides a mechanism for critical linkages between education in a classroom setting and the 'real world' workplace, enhancing personal development and stressing the importance of education in the development of lifelong learners and active citizens (Kolb, 2015). Likewise, WIL provides an approach that can maximise the transformation of professional identities and practices through deliberate integration between the 'abstract' knowledge of the classroom and the lived experience of the workplace.

The *National Strategy on Work Integrated Learning in University Education* frames WIL as an instrument of economic growth and competitiveness, foregrounding a construct of work-readiness and capability development. The Strategy states that: 'WIL facilitates the transition between preparing for and operating in a high skills work environment. It empowers students to understand, adapt to and apply skills in the workplace' and 'for students, WIL experiences such as placements and work-oriented projects … can make a real difference to their skills and capacity'. Whilst these benefits are broadly true, they do not translate easily to the experience of a postgraduate student seeking to leverage education to challenge and extend

their current practice or shift their professional focus. A student returning to study with experience in the workplace does not require the same services and learning as an undergraduate student, but they do still have a range of employability needs (Kinash et al., 2016). Many postgraduate students are using university education to change career path and may lack particular skills in their new domain, whilst others are looking to deepen their expertise and advance to the next level of their career. They tend to be students with existing work experience and no longer benefit from 'traditional' career services and WIL opportunities offered to undergraduate students (Kinash, et al., 2016). However, there is a need to meaningfully engage industry in postgraduate learning experiences and facilitate the transformative learning of students as they broaden, or deepen, existing knowledges and capabilities.

Study overview

This paper presents two case studies of the embedding of WIL practice within postgraduate courses. The first case employed a combination of project-based learning and WIL within an engineering management postgraduate course, with the second case using a praxis model of practice transformation within postgraduate mental health education. Interviews were undertaken with students in both case studies, with 15 students participating in interviews within the engineering case study and 12 students within the mental health case study. Responses were analysed thematically using iterative coding and checking processes (Creswell, 2007). Within this paper a brief synopsis of each of these case studies is provided as examples of possible conceptualisations of WIL curriculum in postgraduate courses.

Case study 1: Postgraduate learning in engineering

The Master of Engineering Management course at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) aims to enhance the core discipline-specific knowledge, professional practice, and employability of graduates from across engineering fields and provide pathways for both domestic and international students for upskilling in an increasingly competitive job market. The make-up of the student cohort, with over 90% of students being international students and most students having a number of years of prior work experience, as well as the 12-month course design, makes approaches to WIL, which utilise internships and placements, of limited value to student learning. However, most students enrolled in this course aspire to upgrade their skills, seek new opportunities for employment or career advancement, and experience new workplace settings to translate experience into their existing work arrangements. Therefore, engagement with industry and exposure to new opportunities remain a key priority. Within this course, a unit on enterprise resource management was designed to incorporate an industry project as a learning and assessment tool. This unit design introduced a real world project-based learning experience, involvement of industry experts in teaching and assessments, and expectations of students to demonstrate implementation of theoretical knowledge acquired by solving real industry problems; in combination these experiences reflected experiences under the banner of WIL.

A review of student experience in this unit, using both student surveys and interviews (Karim, Campbell, & Hasan, under review), highlighted that students saw the experience as a tool of reflective practice, enabling them to expand their current practice and providing a basis for future work opportunities. Analysis of student responses suggest that there is greater impact of this learning on those students with existing work experience, with those with more workplace experience more able to critically reflect on their learning experience in this unit. As one student commented:

> … if someone has experiences, they will do professionally, but [if] he didn't have any experience about this, they cannot do it, or maybe they will do, but not professionally. (P13)

The use of 'professionally' by this student was synonymous with high levels of competence and responsiveness, as opposed simple formulaic responses most evident in novice practitioners. The experience of an industry project provided for students the opportunity to see future career possibilities, demonstrated in the comment of one student:

> … now I'm learning to see another perspective. I mean, from my experience, I had to handle a lot of situations, and I had to learn about some other things, more than the technical things that I had to do, … but now this is like I don't know, like next level. (P11)

Evident in this case study was the transformative power of education, particularly for postgraduate students, and the ability of WIL experiences in postgraduate settings to provide for students opportunities to identify new practice settings and opportunities, rather than just preparing skills for the world of work.

Case study 2: Learning through praxis in mental health education

The mental health workforce in Australia operates within an evolving and challenging environment. Further, this workforce encompasses a variety of professionals working in a wide range of settings. The Master of Mental Health Practice course at Griffith University provides a pathway for various professionals (for example, nurses, community workers, police liaison) to develop their skills and capabilities to work effectively and enhance opportunities in the mental health area. Within this course students undertake a unit titled 'Mental Health Praxis' which utilises a model of WIL grounded in a theory of praxis which requires the deliberate intersection of action and reflection, in the real world, in a process of meaning making and evolution of ethical practice (Grundy, 1987; Mattsson & Kemmis, 2007). The design of this praxis unit was based in a philosophy which asserted that practitioners need to be prepared to learn and implement new practices in a dynamic professional environment. Therefore, practitioners need to be guided in coming to learn *how to learn* with purposefully designed opportunities in work settings providing a lived experience of learning through praxis.

A study of student learning through experiences in this unit was undertaken (Stewart, 2017) highlighting the complexities, but transformative opportunities, afforded through work based learning in a praxis model. Most students in this unit have existing workplaces and professional experiences, with many already working within mental health areas. These students are often seeking to gain formal qualifications in this area allowing them to gain career advancement. Being part of the existing workplace challenged students in being able to decide upon a clear learning goal and plan for their praxis.

> I kind of thought, ooh, what new things can I learn in the workplace and how is that going to work in my role. So, my first thoughts were apprehensive, not very confident that it's going to be effective, and I think I was a bit negative, honestly.

However, the leverage of 'being a student' allowed them access to opportunities in the workplace which would not normally be permitted in their 'normal' role. Students were able to challenge existing practice and workplace norms, under the guise of a student, which led to transformation in their personal practice as well as that of their workplace. Critical to this transformative opportunity was the intersection of reflection and practice that typifies the praxis model, as reflected in the comment of one student:

> Are we just doing [practice] because it's force of habit or are there other ways that we could do it that's actually newer ideas or that's going to work better for this client rather than just doing it because that's how we've always done it.

Evident across all experiences through this unit was the transformative learning enabling the creating (and re-creation) of future work roles and practice. Unlike an undergraduate WIL experience, this praxis model provided students the opportunity to draw upon existing workplace practice, personal experiences, and tools of critical reflection to transform professional practice and identity, empowering students to enable change in their workplace.

A new concept of WIL for postgraduate education

Evident in both case studies is the capacity of industry engagement in postgraduate education to transform understandings of professional practice and establish foundations for future practice. WIL provides a pedagogical approach to learning that integrates the knowledge of the classroom and the practice of the workplace through a lens of critical reflection and personal/professional development. In this concept WIL is not an instrument of employability, but is an approach to learning that values the opportunities of different learning contexts and experiences. As argued by Billett (2004), workplaces are valid and valued learning environments negotiated and constructed by the individual, but mediated and constrained by the affordances, cultural norms and practices of the setting. WIL, particularly in the postgraduate context, exploits these workplace learning environments, leveraging the 'student as learner' to challenge cultural norms and extend workplace affordances, enabling new and transformative practices to emerge. Within postgraduate education WIL has the potential to draw upon lived experience within the immediate setting as well as intersections of new practice with previous experience and practice of a student's past work environments. As a student engaged with the mental health praxis unit commented:

> Even though I didn't want to, [the praxis] was unexpectedly a huge, huge learning experience for me in all areas. So personally, there was a lot of growth there because I was looking at areas that I hadn't looked into before.

This paper, therefore, proposes a concept of WIL in postgraduate learning environments that moves beyond simple constructs of employability and towards models of transformative learning. The case studies presented in this paper highlight two approaches within such a model: project-based learning utilising ongoing professional reflection enabling identification of expanded practice opportunities, and a praxis approach that emphasises the interaction of practice and reflection in the transformation of professional practice and practice settings. The proposed concept of WIL in postgraduate learning is one that provides for transformative learning, broadening and deepening professional identity, and reshaping practice. It is a model that moves WIL beyond capability and skill development, to empowering students to transform identities and practice.

Acknowledgements

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