

**Submission in response to The National Priorities and Industry  
Linkage Fund (NPILF) Consultation Paper**

**Question 9: How does a university measure and maintain the  
quality of WIL activities?**

**Preamble to comment**

The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA, October 2017) issued Guidance Note: Work Integrated Learning (WIL)<sup>1</sup> that was intended to guide universities in the delivery of effective and positive WIL experiences and to be undertaken as a seamless and integral part of a course of study. The development of and adherence to quality assurance processes was viewed by TEQSA as being fundamental to the realisation of the benefits that all stakeholders (e.g., students, host organisations and the universities themselves) wished to obtain from WIL and in assisting students in their development of their overall work-readiness and employability.

Whilst there is no readily available data to indicate the extent that Australian universities have adopted and adhered to TEQSA's 2017 guidelines, my personal experiences indicate that at least one university has done so (The University of Western Australia). Based on my personal experience, the policies developed and practices implemented have worked well where the number of internships undertaken are relatively fewer in number in comparison to the number that the NPILF aspires to achieve.

Given the significant commitment to WIL made by the Commonwealth in the development of policy and the provision of funding, it would be expected that the growth in student participation demands a renewed focus on quality assurance both in terms of practices and the measurement of the performance of individual universities and that of the higher education sector itself.

**Comment**

As the offering of WIL is not without risk, where both foreseeable and unforeseeable events can adversely impact on the experiences of one or more stakeholders, a sound quality assurance framework is essential to guide a university, the higher education sector and government in identifying and mitigating the attendant risk that WIL poses.

Such a framework must have a holistic view of risk where an emphasis is given to pre-emptively eliminating risk rather than retrospectively and reactively dealing with the consequences of failure in quality. **Thus, it is recommended that the Total Quality Management (TQM) framework be used across the higher education sector.**

TQM is typically justified through its focus on total quality costs and the pattern of spending in the four areas of prevention, appraisal, internal and external failure. Prevention costs are the outlays associated with actions taken by an organisation to ensure its processes provide quality products and/or services. Appraisal costs are the costs incurred in measuring the level of quality that could be feasibly attained by the organisation's processes whereas failure costs are the outlays incurred in correcting poor quality products and/or services before (i.e., internal) or after (i.e., external) delivery and/or provision. Whilst it might be feasible to eliminate

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.teqsa.gov.au/latest-news/publications/guidance-note-work-integrated-learning>

internal and external failure costs by investing in prevention and appraisal activities, increased spending may reach a point where the cost of such investments fails to deliver any further reduction in total costs. Thus, the challenge is to optimise the total spend on quality assurance to the extent that prevention and appraisal activities deliver equivalent or greater savings in downstream internal and external failure costs.<sup>2</sup>

In keeping with TQM framework that focuses on upstream quality assurance activities, such as prevention and appraisal, as being potentially beneficial in terms of the quantum of costs associated with downstream internal and external failure, it is recommended that a suite of financial and non-financial measures be developed in each category of quality activities. In terms of what each category means in terms of a university's WIL program, note the following definitions:

**Prevention:** A university's policies and actions directed to minimising the risks associated with a prospective WIL placement being undertaken. These may include:

- Development of WIL quality assurance policies and audit of actual practices.
- Assessment and certification of potential host organisations as being able to provide an internship placement to a pre-specified quality standard.
- Assessment and certification of prospective WIL interns as being able to undertake a placement to a pre-specified quality standard.

**Appraisal:** A university's policies and actions directed to minimising the risks associated with an approved WIL placement proceeding before all parties are properly prepared. These may include:

- Preparation of host organisations for onboarding a student intern prior to the commencement of an approved internship.
- Preparation and testing of WIL interns prior to commencing an approved internship.

**Internal failure:** A university's policies and actions directed to minimising the risks associated with an approved WIL placement as it is being undertaken. These may include:

- Timely monitoring of WIL participants (i.e., student interns and host organisation supervisors) and views on placement quality as it is undertaken.
- Follow-up with WIL participants (i.e., student interns and host organisation supervisors) with a view to ameliorating poor quality performance, where possible, and identifying opportunities for continuous improvement.

**External failure:** A university's policies and actions directed to minimising the risks associated with a completed WIL placement that failed to meet prescribed quality outcomes. These may include:

- Timely monitoring of WIL participants (i.e., student interns and host organisation supervisors) and views on the quality of a placement after it has been completed.
- Follow-up with WIL participants (i.e., student interns and host organisation supervisors) with a view to ameliorating poor quality outcomes, where possible, and identifying opportunities for continuous improvement.

Appendix 1 illustrates some of the key non-financial and financial performance indicators that could be used to assess the quality of a university's WIL program and that of the higher education sector.

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<sup>2</sup> Whilst the focus in the TQM framework focuses on optimising the level of total quality costs incurred, it is suggested that the benefits of effective TQM practices extend well-beyond financial measures. For example, if a university's WIL quality assurance practices are weak, one or more stakeholders (e.g., a student intern or host organisation) may be adversely affected. In such situations, the opportunities for offering further WIL placements may be lost. Although such losses could be measured as opportunity costs, they are not as readily measurable as the out-of-pocket outlays a university may incur.

## Appendix 1: Quality assurance strategies and quality performance indicators

### Prevention quality assurance strategies and potential performance indicators

- Development of WIL quality assurance policies and audit of actual practices.
- Assessment and certification of potential host organisations as being able to provide an internship placement to a specified quality standard.
- Assessment and certification of prospective WIL interns as being able to undertake a placement to a specified quality standard.

**Non-financial indicators:** Documented WIL quality assurance framework including the identification of foreseeable risks and defined procedures for mitigating the likelihood of those risks eventuating; development of policies and procedures for addressing unforeseeable risks, if and when they arise; potential host organisations are vetted in terms of capability to provide and deliver high quality WIL experiences and assessment of competence be well-documented; potential student interns vetted in terms of preparedness to engage in a high quality WIL experience and, where required, additional pre-approval activities to be completed before an aspiring WIL intern is certified as being capable of successfully participating in a proposed internship; audit of compliance with quality assurance framework policies and activities intended to continuously improve preventative actions.

**Financial indicators:** Financial outlays associated with development of WIL quality assurance framework and training university staff in the purpose of the framework and how it is to be implemented; identification, vetting and approval of host organisations deemed to be suitable for placing an approved intern with; recruitment, vetting and approval of aspiring WIL student interns as being able to undertake an approved placement; audit and evaluation of quality assurance policies and practices with a view to continuously improve on same.

### Appraisal quality assurance strategies and potential performance indicators

- Preparation of host organisations for onboarding a student intern prior to the commencement of an approved internship.
- Preparation and testing of WIL interns prior to commencing an approved internship.

**Non-financial indicators:** WIL placement arrangements documented, reviewed and agreed to by all stakeholders (i.e., the student intern, host organisation and approved university representative) prior to placement being approved and commenced; host supervisors informed of and agree to tasks to be undertaken by them during the WIL internship, student interns are provided with workshops and other preparatory activities (e.g., improved proficiency in use of computer packages such as Microsoft Excel) prior to commencement of WIL placement.

**Financial indicators:** Financial outlays associated with provision of the preparation and delivery of pre-placement documentation to host organisations (and supervisors) and student interns; workshops and related activities associated with preparing student interns for an approved internship prior to its commencement (e.g., pre-commencement workshops on work place behaviours and communications, short courses to increase intern proficiency in the use of pre-identified computer packages relevant to WIL placement).

### Internal failure quality assurance strategies and potential performance indicators

- Timely monitoring of WIL participants (i.e., student interns and host organisation supervisors) and views on placement quality as it is undertaken.
- Follow-up with WIL participants (i.e., student interns and host organisation supervisors) with a view to ameliorating poor quality performance, where possible, and identifying opportunities for continuous improvement.

**Non-financial indicators:** Surveys submitted within a nominated time frame from commencement of placement; Ongoing engagement with host supervisors and student interns via face-to-face meetings, telephone, online audio-visual meetings or email throughout placement with a view to identifying emergent quality problems as they arise; Assessment of placement quality as measured by closed-item rating scales and open-ended responses; Assessment of quality of ameliorative action undertaken during placement to address poor quality issues (e.g., measured by closed-item rating scales and open-ended responses).

**Financial indicators:** Financial outlays associated with ameliorating poor-quality WIL experiences (e.g., reimbursement of costs such as the part-reimbursement of student fees, insurance claims, legal and administrative costs).

### External failure quality assurance strategies and potential performance indicators

- Timely monitoring of WIL participants (i.e., student interns and host organisation supervisors) and views on the quality of a placement after it has been completed.
- Follow-up with WIL participants (i.e., student interns and host organisation supervisors) with a view to ameliorating poor quality outcomes, where possible, and identifying opportunities for continuous improvement.

**Non-financial indicators:** Post-completion surveys submitted within a nominated time frame from end of placement; Assessment of placement quality as measured by closed-item rating scales and open-ended responses; Assessment of quality of ameliorative action taken (e.g., measured by closed-item rating scales and open-ended responses);

**Financial indicators:** Financial outlays associated with ameliorating poor-quality WIL outcomes (e.g., reimbursement of costs such as the full or part reimbursement of student fees, insurance claims, legal and administrative costs).

**Note:** The choice of colour for each of post-prevention quality categories is intentional in the sense it mimics those of a traffic light. Where appraisal actions are successfully completed, the internship is signalled as being **‘Ready to Go’**. Given the need to continually monitor how an approved placement is being undertaken, internal quality assurance actions may signal the need for an internship to be **‘Readied to Stop’**. Finally, where an internship has been completed and failed to achieve expected quality standards, it should have been **‘Stopped’** prior to that point being reached.