

Submission to National Priorities & Industry Linkage Fund Consultation Paper

Centre for Decent Work & Industry <https://research.qut.edu.au/centre-for-decent-work-and-industry/>

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The consultation paper advances the idea that the principal role of universities is to provide professional and vocational education and benefits measured primarily in terms of economic utility. We suggest this focus on the 'job-ready' graduate and tension between education for a future career and vocational preparation for a first graduate job is limited and limiting.¹ Graduates need to have skills to adapt and evolve and innovate – these are the skills required for the future of work and the very skills that are developed through liberal education and not necessarily through industry-focussed work-integrated learning. The development of these skills is vital as research suggests that while vocationally-oriented degrees may give graduates an initial head start in the labour market these degrees become obsolete sooner² and result in flatter lifetime earnings.³ Thus while vocationally-oriented education may be beneficial for initial employment prospects it may be of less advantage in later career stages.⁴ Furthermore, despite the explicit vocational purpose the link between vocationally-oriented qualifications and occupational destinations is weak due to the structure of the labour market rather than the supply of qualified graduates and attempts to tightly tie qualifications to occupations or industries risks narrowing the types of jobs that graduates can access.⁵ This submission considers the NPILF priorities suggesting areas that may require attention to safeguard student wellbeing, learning and future careers.

Priorities & aspirations of the NPILF Consultation Paper

While there is a significant body of research and policy which highlights the developmental benefits of WIL, little definitive empirical evidence is available to support the claim that participation in WIL improves employment prospects.⁶ Research which supports the assertion that internships help graduates obtain employment is typically based on subjective self-report surveys of student or employer perceptions, or both, rather than objective employment statistics.⁷ Further, such analyses generally overlook the impact of labour market factors such as the supply of graduate jobs. The amount of and types of work available for new graduates in the labour market has altered significantly, particularly in the shift away from permanent employment towards more precarious forms of employment, such as casual and contract employment and a decline in the size of the public sector which has historically been a large employer of graduates. The result is that many graduates find themselves competing in a crowded market for scarce jobs. **Any emphasis on increasing the total number of internships and practicum placements to enhance graduate employability must therefore be coupled with initiatives to shape and grow the graduate employment market for paid employment rather than more unpaid internships.** This is imperative as research has shown that increases in the volume of WIL as a mandatory degree requirement has seen some students resort to additional (and sometimes unlawful) periods of unpaid work to improve their employment prospects.⁸ This is concerning as many lack formal oversight and may expose students to exploitative and unethical work practices. They may also create a form of occupational closure for those who cannot afford to take on additional periods of unpaid work.⁹ Transferable or portable skills can be developed through a mix of work and life experiences. It is crucial the system developed is sufficiently flexible to recognise the skills and knowledges gained through part-time nonprofessional work experience as contributing to the graduate skills profile and graduate employability.

The consultation paper recognises the importance of providing students with foundations in critical thinking, creativity, communication and system problem-solving. These are skills are deeply embedded in the humanities and arts, disciplines which are not necessarily well served by the proposed approach and its entrenched and limited emphasis on the development of STEM-skilled rather than STEAM-skilled graduates. Further, the development of professional identity, professional judgement, teamwork, communication, and resilience are not the exclusive purview of participation in industry-focussed WIL and can be enhanced through humanities/ arts degrees or transdisciplinary learning approaches.¹⁰ Indeed, research into the future of work suggests that future employment (and employability) will be contingent on the possession of these rather than technical skills which may well become automated.¹¹

Successful work placements depend on a strong tripartite relationship between the student, the work-integrated learning workplace, and the university. This relationship needs to be based on a common understanding of the learning goals of the placement and careful management of both student and employer expectations of placements.¹² This requires close communication between the university and host organisation, including an honest appraisal of the placement student's needs, abilities, and weaknesses, so that the placement program can be built around addressing or managing the impact of these.¹³ Industry sites must be prepared to provide appropriate on-the-job training and supervision if a student is to benefit from the work placement.¹⁴ This will require universities to be funded to educate industry regarding their responsibilities and the educational outcomes expected from placements. **Industry must commit to training the staff who will be supervising students to ensure a quality learning experience.** Universities must be adequately funded to take a proactive role in educating industry on their responsibilities as work-integrated learning workplaces and have the capacity to cease partnerships with employers who have had repeated complaints raised against them. This can only be achieved via a funding model which reduces the potential for industry capture and supports a high level of institutional oversight, particularly in screening the (ongoing) suitability of potential work-integrated learning workplaces, educating students about their workplace rights and responsibilities, and providing appropriate complaints mechanisms.

Proposed framework, distribution options, assessment criteria & allocation methodology

There are also significant institutional and disciplinary differences in how work placements are organized and monitored. One size does not, and cannot, fit all. However, the fundamental principle guiding all WIL approaches must be the wellbeing of students and the emphasis must be on providing quality learning opportunities rather than meeting short term industry demands. More mature and embedded approaches to work placements typically involve high levels of institutional oversight in the identification and selection of suitable workplaces and matching students with available opportunities. However, in some disciplines, there is a practice of requiring students to negotiate and manage their own placement opportunities. This increases risks to students and also increases the burden on industry to respond to these requests. **Systems are required to streamline this process reducing the burden on students and industry.**

Because placements are seen as providing universal benefits to participants, there is often limited consideration of potential negative impacts on participants' social, psychological, and economic wellbeing in their design.¹⁵ Extended unpaid work placements can result in considerable financial stress for students who are financially independent, particularly those relying on paid employment to survive, as this work typically has to be forgone while undertaking placements. Recent research has shown that students participating in work placements can experience significant levels of psychological stress, financial stress, and study/life imbalance.¹⁶ **Part of the funding provided to universities should be allocated to providing financial, social, academic and psychological support for WIL students.**

Diversity in the student population presents a challenge for the provision of equitable access to high-quality work placements. Intersectionality exacerbates vulnerability and disadvantage, so any changes must consider the potential for unintentional discrimination, particularly for women and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Another concern is the challenges faced by international students in accessing and performing well on placements due to cultural differences, language skills and racism.¹⁷ **Where appropriate, practical and legal opportunities for supporting placements to be undertaken in an international student's home country should be explored.**¹⁸

Before the shift of vocational qualifications to universities, some areas of study, such as teaching, pharmacy and nursing, operated apprenticeships with on-the-job training as the accepted method of learning. In these disciplines and courses, learning occurred in the workplace under the supervision of qualified and experienced practitioners. Since industry has all but absolved itself of responsibility for training new staff this burden has shifted to students. Industry re-engagement in this role, both in partnership with the university, and beyond, is vital. However, caution should be exercised in promoting WIL as the dominant employability enhancing strategy. There may also need to be a revisiting of the reasonableness of employer expectations regarding graduate skills and the outcomes of university education.¹⁹ A situation where because the cost burden of higher education—including participating in unpaid work placements—is borne by individual students and not employers, this may lead to further inflation in demands for skills and experience.²⁰ It has been suggested that just as industry declarations of a graduate skills deficit saw universities prioritise certain employability skills in course delivery and design there are concerns that a further embedding of industry placement/internship focused WIL will simply raise the experiential bar on what is required to be considered employable placing further pressure on students.²¹ Further, the presumption of deficit which permeates the consultation paper does not recognise that students may bring a range of transferable soft skills from previous life, study and non-professional work experiences. **Provision should be made for the formal recognition of prior workplace learning.**²²

Quality WIL requires significant institutional investment in trained administrative staff²³ however in response to recent policy changes and losses in international student revenue many Australian universities are seeking to limit the ratio of administrative/professional to academic staff employed. Without these professional staff WIL cannot work well and often results in an additional administrative burden being placed on academic staff which they are not trained to undertake and for which they are not allocated workload. This is exacerbated by the high level of emotional labour which the academic supervisors of students on placement already invest and which can have negative impacts on their wellbeing.²⁴ **Adequate funding must be committed to training and employing WIL administrative staff.**

Example of best practice in the field of Business

If ensuring student learning and safeguarding their wellbeing is central to WIL, work experience models such as service-learning through providing services to disadvantaged individuals and nonprofit organisations, offer an alternative to unpaid work placements while still providing important learning opportunities and supervised client interaction. The Federal Government supported, and Australian Tax Office (ATO) administered, *Australian National Tax Clinic Program* embedded in ten universities nationwide is in its second year of operation. Rather than a WIL driven focus per se, this program adopts a societal approach recognising the interdependency of stakeholders in the tax ecosystem while still meeting the learning outcomes inherent in WIL. Program logic models developed after a pilot program map the relationships between clients, students, the tax profession, ATO, and society, and highlights the short, medium and long-term outcomes from such a program. While WIL and the development of real-world experience, graduate capabilities, and professional skills are highlighted as measurable improvements for students, liberal education is embedded through the development of critical justice-focused skills and more socially aware practitioners. More broadly, there are significant contributions to society in terms of tax literacy, improved tax morale, compliance culture, socially just government spending and tax justice. Succinctly stated, 'the viability of a program depends on having clear and ideally evidence-based outcomes in short and medium terms that will drive longer-term outcomes.'²⁵(p.125) There is evidence to suggest that some employers seek to materially and financially benefit from the unpaid work undertaken by students on placement and may seek to exploit this. A service-learning approach to WIL has multiple benefits for students and society and reduces the potential for exploitation, while still meeting the 'job ready graduate' agenda.

References

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Related Centre submissions

- Senate Select Committee on the Future of Work & Workers (2018) [Submission 7: Work Industry Futures Research Program](#).
National Youth Commission into Youth Employment and Transitions (2019) [Submission: Work Industry Futures Research Program](#).
Senate Standing Committees on Education & Employment Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-ready Graduates & Supporting Regional & Remote Students) Bill (2020) [Submission 18: Centre for Decent Work & Industry](#).
Job-ready Graduates Package Exposure Draft Legislation Consultation (2020) [Submission: Centre for Decent Work & Industry](#).