

Deciding access to work-integrated learning: Human resource professionals as gatekeepers

JACQUELINE MACKAWAY¹

Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

THERESA WINCHESTER-SEETO

Winchester-Seeto Consultancy, Sydney, Australia

Universities, industry and professional bodies advocate work-integrated learning (WIL) as a valuable way to prepare graduates to meet the challenges of contemporary society. When organizations preference particular students over others to host on placement, the full individual and collective potential of WIL is not realized. This paper reports findings from a qualitative study focused on the role played by Human Resource (HR) professionals in influencing student access to WIL placements in Australian organizations. Findings suggest being in a HR role may influence why and how an individual acts as a WIL gatekeeper however, there is an interplay between forces at three distinct levels: organizational, occupational/job and personal, which affect the intentions and actions of the HR professional. Furthermore, the study suggests several conditions are required for an inclusive approach to WIL to be enacted. This study contributes to the underexplored topic of equity and access in WIL.

Keywords: Work-integrated learning (WIL), access, equity, inclusion, gatekeepers

Insufficient attention is paid to matters of equity and access to WIL, despite it being lauded as important.
(Orrell, 2011, p.19).

Research into work-integrated learning (WIL) is dominated with reports on the value of WIL to students, educational institutions and host organizations (Dressler & Keeling, 2011; Rowe, 2015; Smith, Ferns & Russell, 2014). WIL, however, is not equally available to all students, with some unable to access placements (Mackaway, Carter, & Winchester-Seeto, 2014; Orrell, 2011; Peach, Moore, & Campbell, 2016). Students excluded from WIL may not gain access to potential personal and career opportunities (Graduate Careers Australia, 2015; Norton & Cakitaki, 2016), while organizations miss out on “realizing the potential of employing graduates from diverse backgrounds” (Orrell, 2011, p. 19). Furthermore, educational institutions may find themselves in ethically, or even legally, compromising positions if they fail to provide inclusive educational experiences for all students (Brett, Harvey, Funston, Spicer, & Wood, 2016; Hughes, 2015).

Educational institutions endeavor to address issues of equity and access in WIL through policies, processes, and using different models of WIL (Cooper, Orrell, & Bowden, 2010; Peach, et al., 2016; Mackaway, Winchester-Seeto & Rowe, 2013). The senior author’s research looks at this issue from the underexplored perspective of the organizations who host students on placement (Mackaway, 2016a, 2016b). The study described in this paper is part of a broader project that seeks to understand what role organizations play in relation to student equity and access, how organizations set conditions and/or make decisions about student access, the bases for these decisions, and what can be done to improve inclusive practices in WIL. This paper highlights the role of the Human Resource (HR) professional in decisions about student access to WIL placements.

¹ Corresponding author: Jacqueline Mackaway, Jacqueline.mackaway@mq.edu.au

BACKGROUND

Equity, Inclusion and Work-Integrated Learning

Since the early 1990s “Australia’s higher education sector equity framework has been underpinned by the principle of individual social justice” (James, et al., 2008, p. 1). This means that all people, regardless of gender, background, and other personal characteristics or circumstances, should be given a ‘fair go’ to access and succeed in tertiary studies, enabling them to reap the personal, social and economic benefits of a university education (James, et al., 2008; Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2009). However, equality of educational opportunity is not just driven by beliefs in fairness and the transformative power of education. Over the past decade, widening participation in higher education has also been linked to a broader social inclusion policy agenda which associates individual educational inclusion with national economic productivity and societal wellbeing (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008; Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2009, 2011). This agenda depends on universities producing both more and better prepared graduates, and these additional learners will come from groups traditionally under-represented in higher education (Bradley et al., 2008).

Against this backdrop universities, industry bodies and employers are turning to WIL (Universities Australia et al., 2015), and when well designed and delivered, WIL can support the development of skills and capabilities that these various stakeholders demand (Billett, 2009; Smith, et al., 2014). Additionally, WIL can provide important human capital benefits to particular groups of students, not normally available to them (Devlin, 2011; Benson, Heagney, Hewitt, Crosling, & Devos, 2013). “An investment in the future...is the ideal outcome of WIL”, where the benefits experienced by each stakeholder group will collectively contribute more broadly to Australia’s global economic competitiveness and social cohesiveness (Cooper, et al., 2010, p. 5; Universities Australia et al., 2015). The full potential of WIL can only be realized if students have equitable access. An inclusive approach to WIL would align with both the social justice values which underpin the Australian education system and the economic and social imperatives that drive the current social inclusion agenda.

Research into Issues of Access and Equity in Work-Integrated Learning

Issues of student access and equity have been explored primarily as studies of specific student groups’ experiences of WIL within particular degree programs, focusing on student and/or program factors that create barriers. Examples include: the social work degree program with its large number of compulsory placement hours that cause time and financial challenges for those from low-socio economic backgrounds (Brough, Correa-Velez, Crane, Johnston, & Marston, 2015; Harrison, 2013); and international students in business and engineering programs experiencing barriers related to student communication and interpersonal skills, a lack of local networks and knowledge, and selection criteria (Blackmore et al., 2014; Gribble, 2014). Recent research has considered this question more broadly including personal, program and institutional centered challenges (Mackaway et al., 2014; Moore, Ferns, & Peach, 2015), as well as institutional level barriers and enablers (Peach, Moore, & Campbell, 2016) resulting in the development of a set of inclusive WIL principles (Winchester-Seeto et al., 2015).

The host organization perspective is largely absent from extant research on access and equity in WIL (Mackaway, 2016a; Peach et al., 2016), with some minor exceptions. The issue of host preferences for domestic students over international has been identified (Blackmore et al., 2014; Jackson & Greenwood, 2015). The health professions have also reported concerns in terms of the additional effort and risks associated with hosting certain groups of students who may not be fit for professional practice (Nash,

2011; Tee & Jowett, 2009). However, host perspectives remain the poor cousin to studies focused on student and program centered issues. This research blind spot may have several explanations, including the fact that fierce competition amongst educational institutions for student placements means that research into any potentially sensitive topic may be avoided (Bradley et al., 2008).

Organizational Access to Students

There are four main ways organizations involved in WIL gain access to students:

- 1) educational institution allocates students randomly
- 2) educational institution allocates based on organization's criteria and/or student preferences
- 3) host organization selects student from a list provided by the educational institution. An interview may or may not occur.
- 4) student applies directly with organization.

Of these four approaches, three involve host organizations playing a direct role in determining which students gain access to placements. These organizational decisions about student admittance are often made by Human Resource (HR) professionals. As an HR professional once herself, the senior author has firsthand experience of HR managers' involvement in either setting the conditions and/or making decisions about student access. Furthermore, as a WIL teacher and researcher for the past seven years she has witnessed the influence individuals can have on student access to placements. The question of interest to the authors is whether HR professionals preferentially let some groups and/or types of students into their organization and exclude others, which results in HR professionals acting as a type of WIL gatekeeper.

The Gatekeeper Concept

Within the workplace setting, the term gatekeeper is commonly used to describe individual decision makers who control or regulate access to information, others, resources and opportunities (Haas, 2014; Paul & Whittman, 2010; Zikic, Bonache, & Cerdin, 2010). The concept is also used to explain the role particular individuals play in controlling access to employment opportunities, career paths and choices (Zikic, Bonache, & Cerdin, 2010), or indeed, admittance to a profession (Lindberg, 2013; Lumadue & Duffey, 1999). HR professionals can enact their gatekeeping through determining, and/or enforcement of, selection criteria and screening of applicants (Zikic et al., 2010). They use factors such as the local setting and organizational culture to help inform who might be the right fit for their organization (Makkonen, 2015), for example preference is given to local candidates (Zikic et al., 2010, p. 670) or, social capital is valued over skills and knowledge a candidate acquired at university (Lindberg, 2013). Thus, gatekeepers can exclude or include candidates based on judgments of what they deem to be most important. In enacting their HR job responsibilities, these individuals exercise considerable influence and control over matters that impact on who gains access to their organization, including potential employees and students on placement. This is not always undesirable, as providing placements may not be appropriate or may even be detrimental for the student.

AIMS

The study's intention was to gather empirical data to determine if individuals, as part of their HR job, acted as a gatekeeper, influencing and controlling who has access to WIL placements. A further aim was to consider the ways in which the gatekeeper concept might also be useful to understand and address the challenge of student equity and access in the placement model. The study set out to explore four main questions:

- 1) Do HR professionals play a role in deciding who gains access to a WIL placement in their organization?
- 2) Are HR professionals acting as gatekeepers to WIL placements?
- 3) How and why do they enact the gatekeeper role?
- 4) What are the implications for WIL in terms of practice and policy?

METHODS

This study employed an adaptive theory approach, whereby insights from both empirical data and pre-existing theoretical concepts and ideas are sought and used throughout the research process in both inductive and deductive ways to explore and understand the nature of the problem under investigation (Layder, 1998, 2013). In this study, empirical data was collected by way of interviews. The concept of gatekeeper was used as a lens to consider role enactment and to explain the part particular individuals' play in relation to WIL. Ethics approval to conduct this study was granted from Macquarie University's Human Ethics Committee (#5201400873).

Recruitment

A purposive approach to participant sampling and recruitment was adopted, using two criteria to target organizations and individuals (Layder, 2013). The first, given the exploratory nature of the study, was to invite participants from a range of organizational types, sizes and sectors to gain a variety of perspectives. The second was to seek HR professionals within these organizations who could provide insider perceptions and knowledge on both the diversity and inclusion culture of their organization and engagement with the placement model of WIL (Schein, 1990, p. 112).

Participants

Interviews were conducted with 18 individuals ($F=17$; $M=1$) from 14 organizations across Australia (Table 1). Organizations ranged in size and type, covering a variety of sectors including professional and legal services, banking and finance, manufacturing, retail, government and community services. Ten organizations were for-profit, and four not-for-profit. The largest for-profit organization had 190,000 employees nationwide (E10), while the smallest participant organization was a specialist consulting firm with less than 10 employees (E4). Of the 10 for-profit organizations, eight had a dedicated HR function and HR professionals working within them (E6; E7; E9; E10, E11; E12, 13; E14), along with the government department (E8). In the smaller organizations (E1; E2; E3; E4; E5), HR tasks were carried out by non-HR professionals, including executives in leadership positions, workplace supervisors and consultants. This paper focuses primarily on the HR professionals within the study as it provides the opportunity for a closer look at an occupational group which has influence over student access to WIL.

TABLE 1: Study participants - Australian organizations who host work-integrated students.

Sector/industry	De-identified organizational information (size ranged from 190,000 employees to less than 10)	De-identified interviewee information
Community Services (not-for-profit)	Employer 1 (E1) - education Employer 2 (E2) – aged care Employer 3 (E3) - peak body for community group	E1 – 1 x WIL supervisor E2 - 1 x General Manager; 1 x WIL program supervisor/WIL supervisor E3 - 1 x WIL supervisor
Professional Services	Employer 4 (E4) - IT recruitment Employer 5 (E5) – HR job search and recruitment Employer 6 (E6) - professional services* Employer 7 (E7) – disability consulting and recruitment*	E4 - 1 x Managing Director – with HR background E5 – 1 x Managing Director E6 - 1 x HR professional E7 – 2 x disability & recruitment consultants
Public sector	Employer 8 (E8) – branch of state government*	E8 – 1 x HR professional
Manufacturing	Employer 9 (E9) – manufacturing*	E9 – 1 x Finance and HR professional*
Retail	Employer 10 (E10) - retail*	E10 - 1 x HR professional
Banking and finance	Employer 11 (E11) – bank * Employer 12 (E12) – financial services*	E11 – 1 x HR professional E12 – 1 x HR professional
Law	Employer 13 (E13) – legal services* Employer 14 (E14) – legal services*	E13 – 1 x HR professional; 1 x Graduate Program Manager E14 – 1 x HR professional; 1 x Graduate Program Manager

Note: Organizations with a dedicated HR function are indicated with *

Analysis

In-depth semi-structured interviews, with an average duration of 65 minutes, were undertaken to obtain a comprehensive understanding of access and equity in WIL placements. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Questions focused on: organizational perceptions and engagement with equity, diversity and inclusion; participant experiences with WIL and students; the basis for decisions made about who gained access to a placement; opinions about an inclusive approach to WIL; and, opinions on how an inclusive approach to WIL could occur. All transcriptions and field notes were

analyzed using QSR NVivo 10. An iterative cycle of coding, sorting, memo writing and analysis (Layder, 1998, 2013) involved three main steps:

- 1) preliminary coding, where data was roughly grouped based on the following areas: who makes decisions about diversity, inclusion and WIL; inclusive thinking and actions; exclusive thinking and actions; reasons for inclusive/exclusive decisions; external issues/factors; internal issues/factors.
- 2) focused coding, undertaken once initial coding completed. This iterative process produced revised primary categories. Analysis sought links between actions/behaviors and the organizational setting in which experiences/incidents occurred as well as links to the model of WIL in use and the purpose for WIL. The concept of gatekeeping assisted here.
- 3) coded data, examined in light of theories and ideas that related to inclusion/exclusion, organizational behavior and social learning, i.e., organizational purposes for WIL motivated by social justice or economic rationalism.

Challenges with the Study

The sensitive nature of this topic had the potential for participants to reveal, or indeed withhold, examples of unflattering attitudes and behaviors about themselves, their organization or client groups. The lead interviewer's background as a human resource professional was disclosed to participants, and potentially afforded her a level of credibility with interviewees, assisting with their willingness to discuss the more sensitive aspects of the issue. Furthermore, steps were taken when designing interview questions to utilize neutral language and avoid negative or loaded terms such as exclude, discriminate, barrier, or equity groups. Open questions were used, such as "tell me about the students you think may find it challenging to gain a placement with your organization, and why?" Despite the sensitive nature of the topic, participants did reveal attitudes and behaviors that create access barriers for some, and which have also been reported elsewhere in the WIL literature (Allen, Quinn, Hollingworth, & Rose, 2010; Blackmore et al., 2014; Gair, Miles, Savage, & Zuchowski, 2015), and in HR literature (Lindberg, 2013; Makkonen, 2015; Zikic et al., 2010). These steps, and others such as purposive sampling, grounding findings in the data, and making use of pre-existing knowledge and concepts to verify data and explain findings, contributed to the quality and trustworthiness of the study (Bryman, 2010).

FINDINGS

Interviews confirmed that HR professionals play an influential role in decisions about student access to placements either directly or indirectly, and thus act as gatekeepers in WIL.

Findings suggest that factors at three distinct levels influence the intentions and actions of WIL gatekeeping undertaken by HR professionals:

- 1) job/occupational
- 2) organizational
- 3) individual/personal.

Occupational/Job Level Factors that Influence WIL Gatekeeping

The job responsibilities of HR professionals were found to be the most influential factors impacting on their role as WIL gatekeepers. When asked about their WIL programs and their involvement in them, HR professionals revealed varying degrees of responsibility for (and control over) their organization's

purpose for WIL, the model used, selection criteria and other procedural matters, which all had implications for student access to placements.

Participants favored a model of unpaid WIL where students were hosted on site in a block type arrangement i.e., consecutive days over a set block of time. The block placements helped HR professionals find suitable projects/activities for students (E8; E10), while providing a chance to assess a potential employee (E6). Several participants mentioned that the block placements created barriers for particular groups of students, namely, time and financial difficulties for students who had to work to support themselves through university (E13; E14).

If you are putting yourself through uni and you've got expenses and rent commitments, well you can't give up your good part time job to do an internship... and we [organization] probably end up with only the students from high socio economic backgrounds. (E14)

When asked about strategies that might assist access to placements, participants acknowledged that paid internships might alleviate financial barriers for students, but budget constraints made this impossible. Paid work might be offered to students as a way of working around the problem, but this was not the norm and relied on the availability of suitable work (E13). Participants accepted that some students would self-exclude from their organizations because of these barriers, acknowledging that their program was really only accessible to a narrow cohort who had time and resources available to them (E13; E14).

Participants discussed their desire to attract the best and brightest students, and defined what this meant through selection criteria. For several participants, placements were limited to specific disciplines and/or degree programs, with minimum Grade Point Average (GPA) requirements and/or available only to domestic students (E6; E10; E13; E14).

...it might be that they're not one of the top students, so they're not going to be right for us...we have strict GPA requirements...and you've got all these people who come over here to study and the internships are also blocked to them. (E13)

For these HR professionals, WIL presented an opportunity to access potential future employees, it was a talent pipeline (E6; E10; E13; E14). WIL thus assisted these individuals in their HR role of "finding the future workforce" (E14). Participants discussed how students needed to be a good fit for the work and culture of their organization (E4; E13; E14). When probed about the meaning of good fit, they revealed it could be used to exclude so as to protect their organization from those considered unsuitable for employment (E4; E13; E14). Only the HR professionals from the for-profit organizations expressed this view of students as potential employees.

When HR professionals linked WIL to their organization's recruitment strategy it meant automatic exclusion of students who were not seen as potential employees. The bases of exclusion included: accent and/or cultural background (E5; E13; E14), their GPA (E6; E13; E14), lack of requisite social capital i.e., network, that would open the door for them (E4; E9; E10; E12) or their temporary visa status (E10). If an organization however, had strategic goals related to increased participation of a specific equity group within their organization/sector, then participants formulated WIL strategies that opened up placement opportunities to a broader range of students. This meant female students and/or those from diverse cultural backgrounds to reflect client base (E10; E13; E14), or Indigenous students were targeted for placement (E13).

There aren't many Indigenous lawyers. We haven't had many Indigenous students coming through. That's an issue across law. So what we've done is we now partner with an organization called CareerTrackers so that we are bringing our Indigenous students in. That was one where we went 'yes', we're not ticking that box. (E13)

HR professionals in this study also had accountabilities for diversity and inclusion matters. This meant ensuring organizational compliance with relevant legislation such as anti-discrimination laws (E8; E10). The compliance aspect of diversity and inclusion did not dominate conversations, instead views on the benefits of diverse and inclusive workplaces featured (E4; E6; E8; E10; E11; E12; E13; E14). Comments included: "diversity plus inclusion leads to improved business performance" (E8); "leads to better thinking" (E12); "delivers high performance teams" (E10); and, "able to respond to customer demands by having a broad range of talents, as broad as possible" (E11).

The notion of inclusivity however, was not seen as enough by some participants: "you can't just have diversity for diversity's sake" (E10). It also needed to serve a business purpose i.e., "to be for a business outcome rather than say just a CSR [corporate social responsibility] initiative" (E10). While hosting an international student could provide an organization with access to diverse ideas and experiences it also required additional effort, resources and presented risks.

It's almost like an extra resource for my team that's required if we consider international students...that's what puts a lot of employers off to be honest...[and] it becomes difficult and riskier if the student doesn't get PR [permanent residency]. It's a wasted investment. (E10)

These factors make it less attractive for HR professionals to offer placements to international students, particularly if WIL was primarily used for recruitment purposes. Unless an international student was sent by a head office located overseas (E9), then domestic student applications were preferred over international ones (E6; E10). In three instances, international students were excluded from applying in the first place (E6; E13; E14). Whether participants saw this gatekeeping as discriminatory was not clear, but it indicates some of the murkiness in this area.

Several executive level participants used their HR job responsibilities and seniority to modify or change organizational practices to reduce access barriers and to open the gate to more diverse students (E4; E8; E13; E14). The introduction of a blind application process, unconscious bias training for selection panels and taking applications from a range of universities with different demographic profiles featured as ways gatekeepers made placements more accessible (E8; E13; E14).

We all do our best to make that group [selection committee] as diverse as possible. From gender, age and background. They all go through unconscious bias training. They go through interview training. Then we review applications... We strip off personal information. There's no name, address, school. Anything that can lead us to bias. (E13)

The HR professional from the public service sector revealed there was no interview for any student seeking access to a learning opportunity, stating that an interview would disadvantage particular students: "So there are no face-to-face interviews, so that is one of the things that might be helpful if the students are not confident about facing an interview with some strangers" (E8).

HR professionals also chose to consult with university staff to address the lack of diversity amongst applicants for internships (E13) and some worked with third party providers to reach particular groups of students, such as Indigenous students and those with a disability (E8; E11; E13). While access was

opened to a broader range of student groups, some participants still had GPA criteria in place (E11; E13) and conceded that they struggled to be inclusive of marginalized groups, particularly international students (E10; E13; E14), students with a disability (E7; E10; E14) and/or those with lower GPAs (E6; E14).

So we are probably missing out on potentially great [talent] because they don't fit the academic prerequisites...it's a shame...I always wonder who didn't make the cut and are we missing out on a rough diamond who could potentially be amazing. (E6)

Participants did not however, have a completely free hand when it came to the design and management of their WIL program. When describing their programs, they mentioned the need to accommodate requirements set by educational institutions and/or professional associations, meaning HR professionals could not always redesign their WIL programs in line with the needs and demographics of students (E6; E10; E13; E14). Using social media to communicate with potential interns and graduates about the demanding nature of their profession and workplace may have been used as a strategy to push the difficult decision making back to the students themselves: "...you can have an insight on us...warts and all and you make your decision" (E13). Alternatively, employers may have felt students should have some agency in the decision-making process.

Organizational Factors that Influence Human Resources Work-Integrated Learning Gatekeepers

HR professionals do not enact their role in a vacuum, and in this study other considerations at the organizational level also appeared to shape the inclusive or exclusive nature of WIL gatekeeping activities.

As discussed, the organization's business priorities and culture informed how gatekeepers enacted their role, while other dimensions of their workplace environment also had implications for the way HR professionals managed their WIL programs. Reports about organizational resistance and the slow pace of change made tackling some diversity issues difficult (E6; E10; E12; E13; E14). Workload demands (E6) and low levels of confidence amongst supervisors (E6; E7; E11) meant a reluctance by some to take on a student who might require additional support - "we have to make sure people have the right resources, instead of just asking them to do more with less" (E6).

Individual/Personal Factors that Influence Human Resources Work-Integrated Learning Gatekeepers

Despite organizational level challenges, several participants were working toward more inclusive approaches to WIL in their organization. These particular individuals were motivated not only by their occupational responsibilities in the area of diversity and inclusion, but by a personal passion for equality and inclusion.

Why do I want to engage in diversity and inclusion? Just because personally I've had loads - a lot of exposure to people being excluded and so on....My sister was severely disabled...For me personally, my personal experiences are a great driver. (E4)

Despite not being asked directly about their own personal experiences, participants shared stories of being on-the-margins of access to education, work or community, either directly, or by someone close to them. These experiences gave them the drive to champion change within their sphere of professional influence (E4; E6; E12; E13; E14). To enable inclusive change, participants had to employ strategies acceptable within the culture of their organization, which included garnering management

involvement and support (E5; E7; E8; E13; E14), formulating a business case for change (E6; E10) or using consultants to help build inclusive capacity (E7; E8; E10; E11). When asked about their organization's approach to diversity and inclusion in relation to WIL, participants also acknowledged the need for grass-root level support (E2; E6; E8; E11; E14) and that the employees chosen to supervise a student must have the right attitude and capacity to engage. As three participants noted - "you can't force people" (E6; E7; E8) and sometimes you find others within your business who have different values and priorities to your own (E6; E13; E14) - "no matter what the corporation, no matter what their policies are - you still get individual biases all the time" (E4).

DISCUSSION

In research on the interaction between gatekeepers, the gated and gatekeeping mechanisms, Barzilai-Nahon identified a range of ways that gatekeepers act including selecting, displaying, channeling, shaping and modifying information or controlling access to resources (2008, p. 1497). Reasons underpinning these gatekeeping behaviors often relate to a desire to find opportunities to reinforce existing structures, and to challenge or change the status quo (Barzilai-Nahon 2008, p. 1497). This study found parallels with several of these features, all of which have implications for student access to placements:

- 1) Shaping the purpose of WIL, specifically the placement model, to align with HR recruitment and talent management responsibilities;
- 2) Selecting and/or making choices about the placement eligibility or selection criteria as well as selecting students themselves to ensure a good fit between student and organization;
- 3) Displaying and channeling information about their organization to students, third party providers and educational institutions to attract or discourage applications from particular student groups;
- 4) Modifying and adapting internal organizational processes to challenge the status quo and open the door to students previously excluded.

As WIL is not core business to any of the organizations in this study, and students are not employees, HR professionals engage with WIL in ways that complement and enhance their other HR job responsibilities. These responsibilities center mainly on people management policies and strategies, enacted to support business needs and add value to the organization (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015; Lawler & Bourdreau, 2015; Stone & Dadrack, 2015). Unsurprisingly, the majority of participants link WIL to their recruitment and talent management strategy, using placements as a way to attract, test and secure potential future employees.

This study demonstrates that while someone's occupational role, here that of HR professional, affects why and how someone acts as a WIL gatekeeper, it does not provide the full picture. There is an interplay between forces at three distinct levels: organizational, occupational/job and personal, which influence the intentions and actions of HR professionals. One example is minimizing organizational exposure to risks of non-compliance to anti-discrimination and related legislation. Compliance, however, is not always the primary motive, a finding echoed in other research (The Korn/Ferry Institute, 2013). As shown in this study, inclusive approaches to WIL must also fit the culture and business goals of organizations. Interviews reveal the lengths to which some individuals go to identify and frame an acceptable business alignment, apparently motivated by two main drivers. First, the recognition that management and staff must be supportive of an inclusive approach to WIL for it to be successful, i.e. finding ways to win hearts and minds. Second, personal experiences of exclusion or discrimination can spur the extra effort sometimes required to make placements accessible to diverse

groups of students. The occupation or job role of an HR professional, enacted within the context of an organization with its own purpose, goals and culture, along with the personal experiences, values and beliefs of the individual, all give shape to the WIL gatekeeping of HR professionals.

Traditionally, HR professionals have primarily focused on the internal workings of their organizations. More recently they are called on to increase their effectiveness through more outside/in thinking (Ulrich, Younger, Brockbank & Ulrich, 2012). Such thinking compels HR professionals to understand the external social, political, economic, technological and demographic conditions their organization operates in, as well as stakeholders, to better position responses to external conditions and stakeholder needs (Ulrich, et al., 2012). Outside/in thinking is similar to the notion of boundary spanning found amongst gatekeepers, whereby knowledge is gathered, shared and used in business strategic ways (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Haas, 2015). HR professionals in this study describe working across internal departments and structures of authority, and external parties such as universities, recruiters, unions and expert consultants. Thus, it may not be difficult for them to think and work across boundaries to address challenges of equitable student access to placements. Indeed, some participants mentioned their desire to do more boundary spanning and outside/in thinking, specifically with professional associations and student societies, to improve student access to WIL and graduate programs.

Findings from this study suggest that HR professionals occupy a potentially unique position for making WIL placements more equitably available. Their awareness of diversity and inclusion matters from a professional, and sometimes personal standpoint, provides a level of familiarity with, and sensitivity to, the challenges facing students. Participants demonstrated a variety of ways they enacted procedural fairness to address access barriers. HR professionals in this study discussed how they develop flexible workplace policies and initiatives in response to societal demands to address issues of cultural and gender inequity, which also help meet the practical need to attract and retain talent in a tough economic climate. Collectively, these factors may mean HR professionals are well placed for re-imagining how WIL could be more inclusive, and thereby also aligning it more closely with Australia's values of 'a fair go for all' (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2009).

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This study found that factors at the individual, job and organizational levels influence decisions made about student access to placements. These factors suggest several conditions are required for an inclusive approach to WIL placement (see Table 2).

While this study showcases a small number of HR professionals at a particular point in time, it does act as a starting point for understanding the role such professionals play in student access to WIL. The combination of understanding who and why individuals act as WIL gatekeepers, and consideration of the outside/in thinking and the boundary spanning capacity of HR professionals, might prove useful in finding ways to create and maintain the necessary conditions required for equity of student access to placements. There are many consequences for individual students, for disadvantaged and under-represented groups of students if we do not address this issue. Of broader concern, however, is that the transformative potential of WIL for individuals, and its capacity for social and economic benefit, will not be fully realized.

TABLE 2: Conditions required for an inclusive approach to work-integrated learning placements.

Stakeholder	Condition
Host organization	HR, WIL professionals and workplace supervisors with an inclusive capacity i.e., the attitude, skills, time and positional power to enable them to support and enact an inclusive approach to WIL.
Host organization	Removal and reduction of organizational barriers to placements to enable equity of access to occur i.e., fair and transparent application/selection processes such as blind applications, diverse selection panels, unconscious bias training for staff. The removal of these types of barriers represents potentially significant changes to the structures of programs.
Host organization	Leadership support to build organizational capacity for inclusive WIL.
Host organization and educational institutions	Open relationships between educational institutions and host organizations to allow ideas, concerns and needs to be discussed and solutions found to address equity and access issues in WIL.
Host organization and educational institutions	Acknowledgment that all stakeholders have their own purpose for WIL, but that these different purposes may have implications for equity of student access to placements.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors thank the reviewers for their helpful comments and advice. The senior author thanks the feedback provided by her writing group on early versions of this paper.

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