

Formalizing feedback in work-integrated learning partnerships: Opportunities for collaboration

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Work-integrated learning (WIL) involves employers and industry in education and training. In order to maximize benefits for all involved, sustainable and reciprocal processes are necessary. While institutions may have internal mechanisms to gather feedback from external partners, the feedback process often tends to be ad hoc. To inform the development of systematic and useful mechanisms, in-depth semi-structured interviews were held with eight representatives of large industry groups providing WIL opportunities for nursing and allied health students enrolled in two Australian universities. Interviews were recorded and transcribed; data was analyzed thematically. Findings confirm the centrality of relationships to successful WIL partnerships. Although participants expressed general satisfaction with existing feedback processes, the consensus was for: (a) the introduction of more strategic and standardized approaches, and (b) collaborative approaches based on rigorous and careful understanding of the WIL context.

Keywords: Work-integrated learning, feedback, industry-partner, university, allied health, nursing

Sector wide, systematic and accessible processes able to identify, measure, and report the costs and benefits of work-integrated learning (WIL) for industry partners may enhance WIL sustainability. Further, the systematic collection of this data will enable the higher education sector to continue to build mutually beneficial relationships with industry partners enabling the ongoing availability of quality workplace learning opportunities for students. Such a mechanism will also support education provider compliance with Australian higher education regulatory requirements Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA, 2015).

This paper reports on a collaborative project between two publically funded Australian multi-campus, higher education providers. The exploratory project, supported by a grant from the National Association of Field Experience Administrators Inc. (NAFEA), extends findings from contemporary research examining the systematic collection of student feedback on WIL (Ebbs et al., 2019; Marlow & Saunders, 2017; Venville et al., 2018; Venville et al., 2016) and explores nursing and allied health industry partner perspectives and experiences of current feedback processes and mechanisms used by universities.

BACKGROUND

WIL is a key strategy used by education providers to enhance graduate employability and involve employers and industry in education and training (Atkinson, 2016). The provision of WIL experiences for higher education students is reliant on opportunities provided by industry and community partners, the benefits of which for students, are well known (Jackson, 2015; Peach et al., 2014; Smith &

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Betts, 2000; Trede, 2012). Student participation in WIL reinforces the professional learning acquired in traditional university learning contexts while simultaneously developing generic workplace skills. Investment in WIL can provide employers and industry partners with access to extra “staff” resources; the opportunity to identify potential recruits and “give back” to their industry or profession (Atkinson et al., 2015; Martin et al., 2019; Orrell, 2011). Known barriers to industry partnerships and participation in WIL include financial and time costs associated with supervising students; lack of knowledge of WIL teaching and learning processes; differing expectations about the outcomes and benefits of WIL, and lack of educational institution flexibility and responsiveness to employer business needs and concerns (Atkinson, 2016). Challenges to employer engagement in WIL remain. Enhancing the WIL experience for all stakeholders is dependent upon collaboration, support, communication and connection between universities and employers (Ferns et al., 2016; Jackson et al., 2017; Ross, & Guescini, 2019).

WIL at university takes many forms ranging from ad hoc arrangements to full integration within undergraduate and postgraduate courses or degree programs (Sachs et al., 2016). Each form of the WIL experience shares characteristics and generally involves training for future employment (Von Treuer et al., 2011). The offering of work-integrated learning (often described as student placements in nursing and allied health disciplines) is potentially challenging for service providers. Studies have shown that the WIL experience is largely dependent on the allocation of adequate financial and human resources by stakeholders. Despite this, a number of benefits are evident including the creation of a sustainable and capable emerging workforce through reciprocal industry partnerships and informed curriculum.

Good practice in WIL, as described by Sachs et al. (2016), comprises of stakeholder relationships that are mutually beneficial and based on trust and reciprocity. This view is reiterated by Cooper and Orrell (2016) who describe these characteristics as “powerful mechanisms for success in the diverse missions and goals of these agencies and in particular educating the deliberate professional” (p. 111). Each partner in the WIL experience should benefit from their investment and it is imperative that educational providers understand the experience of, and associated costs and benefits of WIL for industry partners (Smith & Smith, 2010). This becomes increasingly important as nursing and allied health industry partners are subject to greater productivity demands (Australian Productivity Commission, 2015) and academic programs requiring growing numbers of high-quality placements (Universities Australia, 2019). While individual education providers may have internal mechanisms to gather feedback on WIL from industry partners there is little evidence that employer feedback regarding their experience of WIL is consistently sought, or responded to (Venville et al., 2018).

RESEARCH CONTEXT

This study was a joint project between two publicly funded Australian universities. Australian Catholic University (ACU) is a multi-campus university with presence in four states and one territory and is the largest provider of teachers and nurses in Australia. The Faculty of Health Sciences, which is the home of nursing, allied health and other related disciplines, accounts for approximately 46% of university enrolments. A central unit of the university undertakes the collection of student feedback on all units and teaching, including feedback on WIL units. Feedback from industry partners engaged in student placement organization and supervision is collected at the local, discipline level.

Victoria University, (VU) is also a multi campus Australian university with a presence in two states. It is one of Australia’s few dual sector universities, hosting substantial amounts of both vocational (skills-based) and higher (academic-based) education in the same institution. Nursing and allied health disciplines are situated within the College of Health and Biomedicine and account for approximately

63% of College enrolments and about 15% of total university enrolments. Student feedback regarding all units of study is collected via a central student evaluation system. Collection of feedback from industry partners engaged in student placement organization and supervision is currently the responsibility of individual disciplines.

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

The study adopted a qualitative research methodology. This approach recognizes that the experiences and perceptions of industry partners are critical to the development of feedback processes and tools that meaningfully capture the experience, costs and benefits of WIL from the partner perspective (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). This methodology is commensurate with the collaborative approach required to enhance WIL partnerships and opportunities.

Purposive sampling (Patton, 2015) enabled the recruitment of key industry partners engaged in the provision of WIL opportunities for nursing and allied health students. These disciplines were chosen, as they typify diversity in WIL experiences. Nursing and allied health placements may differ in a number of ways including length of time, scope of practice, supervision requirements, professional accreditation, and assessment processes. All relevant ethical approvals were obtained prior to data collection (Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee Reference number: HRE18-057).

Following standard protocol for Human Research Ethics in Australia, industry partners were advised that participation was voluntary and that a decision to participate or not would have no impact on their current or future relationships with higher education providers. Representatives of industry partners opting in to the study participated in one semi-structured individual telephone interview. Each interview focused on (i) a participant's understanding of WIL and its relevance to a specific discipline; (ii) when and how higher education institutions currently request partner feedback; (iii) their experience of providing feedback to higher education institutions; (iv) the kinds of support they receive from universities; (v) their perceptions of how educational institutions respond to their feedback and (vi) suggestions/recommendations regarding feedback processes.

A total of eight semi-structured interviews were completed in this study. The study participants were from a range of discipline areas including social work, general and psychiatric nursing, exercise physiology and paramedicine. All participants identified themselves as current and experienced supervisors of nursing and allied health students engaged in WIL, and all were located in the state of Victoria in Australia. Three of the eight participants were also responsible for student placement coordination within their disciplines. It was acknowledged that many of these partner organizations regularly hosted students from both institutions that collaborated in the research project, as well as other national and state based higher education providers. The participants' broad experiences enabled them to offer informed perspectives on the feedback processes that occurred in their discipline sector. It is notable that all industry partners approached about the study agreed to participate.

To ensure the integrity of the interview process, each telephone interview (20 to 30 minutes in length) was conducted by one member of the research team. All interviews with industry partners were recorded and transcribed; a manual analysis of the qualitative data was then undertaken adopting the disciplined and systematic method outlined by Sandelowski (1995) in her discussion of qualitative research in health and nursing. This approach considers each transcript as a whole to develop a sense of the unique narrative of each interview before moving on to comparison with other transcripts. The consideration of each transcript allows for the extraction of facts. The comparison of interview transcripts allows for the identification of common themes/sub-themes, as well as consideration of

unique experiences. Two researchers of this study read each transcript several times; a summary of de-identified emergent themes was then presented to the research team for further review and refinement.

FINDINGS

Findings indicate a general satisfaction with current feedback processes, yet a clear call for the introduction of more strategic and standardized approaches to feedback collection is made. Participant perspectives of WIL, current feedback processes and strategies for enhancement are now presented.

Work-Integrated Learning Matters

A deep level understanding of, and commitment to, WIL programs organized by the higher education providers was expressed by each participant of this study. Although the data analysis identified strong differences between disciplines in terms of assessment schema, and expectations of WIL programs, all respondents agreed on the importance of industry-based placements in preparing students for the work force. Despite a strong commitment to WIL, participants identified problematic and recurrent systemic issues including the financial cost to the agency (often exacerbated by loss of staff time on task due to student supervision); a lack of clarity in relation to students' existing capabilities and scope of practice, and the difficulties associated with an increasing expectation on agency/partner supervisors for assessment of students. A further key issue related to the large number of some student cohorts (>1000) sent to a particular agency and the consequent impact this has on organizational capacity.

Communication Embedded in Relationships

The importance of rich relationships underpinned each participant's narrative, and overall, respondents were satisfied with the communication/feedback between university WIL partners. Seven of the eight respondents were positive about their WIL partner experience and explained this as being the result of well-nurtured relationships and a clear commitment from the university to support the maintenance of those relationships. Less positive experiences reported related to extremely high student numbers from a range of institutions, perceptions of inadequate student preparation and lack of clarity regarding expected learning opportunities and outcomes.

Telephone and email were the most common modes of communication used between universities and WIL partners. Industry partners described most of their contacts with respective universities as "quick and easy", with a timely response greatly valued. Respondents were generally satisfied with their current communication experiences and most reported being able to work collaboratively with their university partners in the planning for, and resolution of WIL related issues. Again, and despite acknowledgement of the need for, and importance of, formal mechanisms of communication, the pre-existing relationship was highlighted as crucial in terms of useful informal communication. Although all respondents highlighted the importance of solid and formalized relationships with their university partners, they also sounded a note of caution. One participant stated that, "The best relationships that I have with the institutions are the ones where the people recognize that we are doing a service to them, that we are taking their students for free basically, and to the profession." This meant that despite the call for more formal relationships (e.g., partnership agreements), participants continually stressed that informal processes should not be entirely replaced by formal ones.

Enabling Feedback

Participants were clear about the issues on which they wished to give and receive feedback. These included the opportunity to receive more information on the nature of preparation of students, and the ability to provide feedback on the adequacy of such preparation (exchange of information between curriculum and sector contexts). Industry partners were particularly concerned with issues such as dress codes, timeliness, and appropriate conduct as in many nursing and allied health roles, these behaviors may have occupational health and safety implications. Partners sought the ability to provide timely feedback in the event of unsuitable "fit" of student with the placement context, student inability/reluctance to embrace diverse learning opportunities, and student inability/reluctance to learn from constructive feedback. All expressed a desire to participate in more formal, annual reviews of the WIL experience. They saw this as a means of enabling industry contribution to quality improvement processes designed to address both general and specific issues related to WIL in nursing and allied health.

The day-to-day supports provided by universities were generally viewed as helpful with some participants reporting some notable highly valued additions. Examples of these included free of charge supervision/assessment training provided by some universities for potential student supervisors; quick responses to daily "urgent" matters and timely follow up on more strategic matters. One of the partners stated that:

Universities have slightly different processes. Some universities, all communication is done by email, which means you can't call somebody. This is more to WIL partners in general. I think that is an area that makes it more difficult for our staff, they like to call somebody. Processes between WIL partners are different, so a bit more consistency would be nice.

Improvement Processes

Respondents recognized a need for a strategic and perhaps more standardized approach to the collection of industry feedback and made the following recommendations:

- Industry partners receive greater clarity regarding the professional expectations for students at each stage of their qualification (e.g., beginning, mid, final stages).
- Assessment processes for disciplines be formalized and standardized. This would reduce the burden of completing different assessment documentation for the same discipline for different universities.
- All higher education providers consider the development of an electronic logbook/assessment tool or other readily accessible assessment framework.
- Feedback collection be formalized and industry partners receive information regarding the outcomes of feedback provided, for example, formalizing feedback processes. A periodic survey was suggested, however, some doubt was expressed about reliable completion given the workload impacts on some partner agencies.
- Higher education providers continue to invest in the partner relationship at both discipline and more strategic levels. Possible areas for relationship improvement and enhancement included greater opportunities for professional development and the establishment of research partnerships.

IMPLICATIONS

Understanding the experiences and perceptions of nursing and allied health industry partners engaged in student placement organization and supervision is essential to the provision of quality WIL opportunities for students. This project confirms the centrality of trust, relationship, and communication to the WIL endeavor (Jackson et al., 2017; Sachs et al., 2016) and calls for the introduction of more formal and strategic feedback mechanisms and processes. While recognizing the value of the informal relationship between industry and higher education provider representatives, this study highlights the need for formal feedback processes. It is these more official processes that participants believe would enhance knowledge, and support collaboration and exchange regarding assessment regimes and competencies. Importantly for Universities, partners expressed the need to guard against a mechanistic approach above a collaborative approach based on rigorous and careful understanding of the placement context. These findings underscore the need for WIL programs to be evaluated by all stakeholders in a collaborative manner (Ball & Manwaring, 2010).

The research team acknowledge the limitations of this small exploratory study focusing on the experiences of a discrete number of nursing and allied health partners. All partners approached agreed to participate and all were interested in enhancing relationships with their academic partners. Their views may not represent those from other disciplines and those less interested in stronger partnership arrangements. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize the extensive experience in WIL each participant brought to this project.

It is hoped that the knowledge gained provides a springboard for further conversations about WIL feedback processes. We look for opportunities to extend our collaborations and recommend further research in this area. In particular, we are keen to see the creation of a shared understanding of formal and informal feedback processes and development and testing of formal feedback tools. We issue an invitation to collaborate to our industry partners (WIL agencies) and university colleagues. Through increasing understanding of our partners' perceptions of the benefits and challenges associated with WIL, a collaborative culture of engagement between educational institutions and industry will continue to grow. This has the potential to lead to the development of nursing and allied health curricula that fulfils educational imperatives, meets the needs of the workforce and improves client and community outcomes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to thank the National Association of Field Experience Administrators Inc. (NAFEA) for funding this small project. Preliminary findings were presented at the 2018 NAFEA Conference, Melbourne, "WIL2020 and Beyond".

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