



Redesigning work integrated learning placements to support students living with disabilities

A case study of best practice career development learning for students with disability

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This project aimed to critically engage with existing good practice in CDL for students living with disabilities and then develop, pilot and showcase further examples of best practice programs and resources to complement what already exists.

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Career Redesigning work integrated learning to support students living with disabilities

A case study of best practice career development learning for students with disability

Introduction

This case study explores the perceptions and experiences of students living with disabilities regarding work integrated learning (WIL) placement during their university study. In our study, students living with disabilities included those with intellectual, learning, physical or sensory disabilities, as well as those who have a mental health, neurological and/or chronic medical condition(s). The study took place at one university in Victoria, Australia, in 2022. At the time of the study, the university had an estimated 12% of the student intake identifying as having one or more disability, compared to a national estimate of 17% (ABS, 2019). The study design was influenced by Principle 2 of the Best Practice Principles for career development learning (CDL) for students with disability: CDL co-designed with people with disability promotes the empowerment and agency of this group. The project invited currently enrolled students living with disabilities to share their perspectives on the benefits of, and the barriers to, participation in WIL placement, their ideas on ways to make WIL placement more inclusive, and their suggestions for resources that could better support students in the future. In our study, we sought only to explore for-credit WIL placement experiences, where the placement was undertaken as part of the student's course, credit was received, and placement was supported by the university. Placements varied across the student cohorts, and included placements in industry, health settings and schools.

Findings suggest that students value WIL placement for career preparation but that it raises several challenges regarding access, disclosure, and corresponding anxiety around meeting expectations. Suggestions for improvement including a learning support coach or mentor, open dialogue around disclosure, and possible accommodations and flexibility around assessment. Through this study, we provide key insights into the inclusion and access of current WIL placement experiences and offer recommendations on how universities can continue to develop and support inclusive WIL placement experiences for students living with disabilities.

Background

Research has identified that equity students, including students living with disabilities, continue to participate less frequently in WIL placement despite an overall increase in their

tertiary education participation (Universities Australia, 2019). Placement (sometimes referred to as internship) refer to a designated time that students spend within an organisation (e.g. hospital, school, law firm) as an opportunity to apply the learning gained within a formal unit or subject (i.e. credit bearing). Placements can take place either online, blended or in-person and can vary from a few days to weeks or months. The benefits of placements for equity students are well known and include skill development, networking and professional identity formation (see Bell et al., 2021). According to 2020 and 2021 combined Graduate Outcome Survey data, placements also have a modest but positive impact on employment outcomes for students with disabilities. The impact was across all course levels with students who had participated in a placement being more likely to be involved in full-time employment once they graduate (64.7%) than those who did not participate in a placement (60%) (QILT, 2021). This data set also reported that students had a greater sense of preparedness for work having undertaken placement (80.9%) compared with those who had not participated in placement (66%) (QILT, 2021).

It is critical that universities explore how WIL placement can be more equitable to diverse students. Numerous scholars have advocated for greater attention on how to best support students living with disabilities in WIL placement and, specifically, to identify what practices or resources could be modified or created to better support inclusion and access (Bell et al., 2021; Kilpatrick et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2009). The reporting of this case study is timely as WIL experiences (i.e., placements, simulations, field trips) have become a recent policy focus with the introduction of the *Job-ready Graduates Package* (DESE, 2020). The funding provided by the National Priorities and Industry Linkage Fund (NPILF) to universities aims to increase the number and types of WIL experiences on offer, including for-credit placements (DESE, 2020).

Project aims

Through this project we aimed to understand how WIL placement could be more inclusive to students living with disabilities and to provide recommendations and resources that could benefit the Australian higher education sector. To achieve this, we posed the following questions:

- What are the perceptions and experiences of students living with disabilities regarding WIL placement(s)?
- What benefits and challenges, anticipated or lived, do students living with disabilities face in WIL placements?
- How could WIL placement be more inclusive and accessible to students living with disabilities?

Research methods

The study gained full ethical consent from Deakin University's Human Research Ethics Committee (reference number: 2022:021). We used a mixed methods approach that generated data across two phases. In the first phase, current students who were registered with the disability support centre were invited via an email to respond to an online questionnaire that primarily sought to explore the motivations of and barriers to the participation of students with disabilities in WIL placement. The recruitment email was distributed in Trimester 1 of 2022 with a plain language statement and online consent form. Also included was a separate link to an expression of interest (EOI) for students to participate in the second phase of the project: 1-hour online focus groups. Students had the choice therefore to participate in the survey and/or online focus groups. The study was also promoted on the student union blog page to extend the opportunity to participate in the research to students with disability who had not registered with the disability support centre.

The online survey was anonymous and open to students living with disabilities who had either: a) already participated in a WIL placement, b) were hoping to participate in a WIL placement in the future, and c) students who did not plan to participate in a WIL placement. The survey was a mix of open-ended, Likert-scale and demographic questions. It was created in Qualtrics to be accessible for students using text-to-speech software. In the survey, students were invited to self-select the type(s) of disability they identified as having. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Students' self-reported disability types (n = 132)

TYPE OF DISABILITY	n	% of responses	% of respondents
Mental health condition	98	38	74
Medical condition	59	23	45
Neurological condition	37	14	28
Physical disability	21	8	16
Specific learning disability (SLD)	15	6	11
Neurodevelopment disorder	12	5	9
Low vision/blind	6	2	5
Hard of hearing/deaf/Deaf	3	1	2
Intellectual disability	3	1	2
Acquired brain injury (ABI)	1	<1	<1

TYPE OF DISABILITY	n	% of responses	% of respondents
I prefer not to say	2	<1	<1
Total	257	100	

Students were also asked to self-select any other student cohort(s) they may identify as belonging to (students could select more than one). The majority identified as belonging to at least one other grouping, summarised in Table 2, while some (n = 21) did not.

Table 2: Student equity group (n = 111)

STUDENT COHORT	n	% of responses	% of respondents
First in family (i.e. in their immediate family)	44	26	40
From a regional or remote area	38	22	34
From low socioeconomic area	30	18	27
Carer responsibilities (e.g. child, parent)	19	11	17
From a non-English speaking background	11	7	10
Indigenous or Torres Strait Islander	7	4	6
I prefer not to say	20	12	2
Total	169	100	

Student survey respondents were enrolled across a variety of degree types in a range of over 60 courses. From a total of 130 respondents, 93 students reported that they had not participated in WIL placement. Of these, 56 students indicated that they planned to enrol in WIL placement unit in the future (60%), and 35 students indicated that they did not plan to enrol in WIL placement (38%). Of the students who had undertaken a placement (n = 43): 21 (49%) had completed the WIL in person in a metropolitan-based organisation, 14 (33%) had completed an online or hybrid placement, and 8 (19%) had completed a WIL in person in a regional or rural organisation. At the time of the survey, 71% of the participants had not participated in a WIL placement.

In the second phase of data generation, students living with disabilities participated in online focus groups (n = 27). Students were invited to share their experiences and perceptions of WIL placement and to offer their suggestions and ideas for future resources that could be created to mitigate the challenges faced in WIL placement by this cohort. The participants were not asked to provide any demographic responses. A series of six online focus groups were conducted in May 2022 facilitated by the authors and with a range of between four and five participants in each focus group. The focus groups conducted on the Zoom platform ranged in duration from between 37 minutes and 62 minutes and were audio recorded and transcribed with permission.

The data generated in both phases were analysed by two members of the research team using an approach described by Bazeley (2009) as three-step coding (describe, compare and relate). The initial coding involved thematically coding the responses to each survey question in Microsoft Excel followed by the data generated from the focus groups. Variances in themes across the responses to the questions in the survey and focus group data were then identified and discussed across the team to elaborate meaning and interpret the data.

Findings

To present our findings, we have organised data relating to the benefits and challenges of WIL, with discussion of the experiences of students who had completed a WIL placement and students’ perceptions of what the benefits or challenges might be in placement. We then discuss the students’ suggestions for ways to make placement more inclusive to students with disability and possible supportive resources that the participants suggested. The findings are presented in the following sections:

- Benefits of WIL placement
- Challenges of WIL placement
- Students’ suggestions for ways to make WIL placement more inclusive
- Students’ suggested resources

We indicate in the text if the data originated from survey responses and/or focus groups.

Benefits of WIL placement

Students reported a range of experienced and perceived benefits of WIL placement in the survey and the focus groups. In the survey, 28 out of the 43 students who indicated that they had completed a placement indicated through a Likert scale how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following benefits of their WIL placement, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Students’ reported benefits of WIL placement (n = 28)

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I learned new skills	0	0	2 (7%)	11 (39%)	15 (54%)
I was able to network with people	2 (7%)	2 (7%)	5 (18%)	9 (32)	10 (36%)
The placement informed my professional identity	0	0	3 (11%)	9 (32%)	16 (57%)

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
(i.e. where I see my career going)					
I was able to socialise with peers	1 (4%)	4 (14%)	2 (7%)	11 (39%)	10 (36%)
My WIL experience contributed to preparing me for entering the labour market with a disability or condition	4 (14%)	5 (18%)	7 (25%)	8 (29%)	4 (14%)

The majority of students with disabilities reported positive benefits including learning new skills (n = 26, 93%, agreeing or strongly agreeing), building a professional identity (n = 25, 89%, agreeing or strongly agreeing) and socialising with peers (n = 21, 75%, agreeing or strongly agreeing). However, fewer students reported positive benefits around the opportunity to network (n = 19, 68%, agreeing or strongly agreeing) and that placement contributed to their preparation for entering the labour market with a disability or condition (n = 12, 43%, agreeing or strongly agreeing).

The focus group responses suggested WIL placements can be opportunities for students to gain industry knowledge, form future career opportunities and form an understanding of what the daily work of that career might be like; as one student said, “you get accustomed to what it's like having the kind of job that you're looking for”. A student response to an open-ended survey question that asked students to expand on the benefits of placements also highlighted how the experience was an opportunity to see how working in their chosen industry might relate to their disability as they outlined their desire to gain:

real-work experience and training, gain an idea of how said work or career area might work around my disability, and the opportunity to network so that if I decide to return to that field of work post-graduation, I have already begun to build a relationship. (Student survey response)

The student participants also viewed WIL placement as an opportunity to apply and develop the skills they have learned in university in a professional setting. This was seen as a useful way to provide evidence to potential future employers of their employability skills, with a student from a focus group saying:

I think what the benefit of placements or internship is actually having the opportunity to demonstrate your skills that you've learned through university. I think it's really important when applying for jobs for key

selection criteria's [...] Often, in interviews, they do want you to talk about outcomes in relation to what you've achieved or measure the outcomes of what you've done. (Student focus group response)

Students in the survey who hoped to complete placement also touched upon the social elements of placement. For some, placements clearly represented an opportunity to meet new people and potentially connect with others. The social aspect was also considered by those in the focus groups, as one student suggested that “just having the conversations with the mentors on placement is really valuable”. In both the survey and the focus groups, students also reflected on the importance of social interactions in WIL placement as being key for building confidence, with one student from a focus group saying:

Ultimately, you have to interact with people. As a cloud student, you're not interacting with people. You're not doing one-on-one case things. I think it's huge. Especially for me, gaining confidence is massive. (Student focus group response)

Students also reflected on the ways they may feel safe in WIL experiences as WIL placement was perceived as a positive transition between study and work. One student in a focus group said:

it's that middle ground of you not just getting chucked into the deep end after university. Obviously, getting some safety nets, I suppose, with it as well so you can rely on the university to back you up in certain scenarios. (Student focus group response)

Challenges of WIL placement

Survey and focus group data demonstrated that students with disabilities faced a range of challenges in relation to WIL placement. Students shared the challenges they anticipated with placement and the ones they had experienced first-hand. For survey participants who had not yet completed a placement, anticipated challenges related to their concerns about meeting expectations of the placement, how the organisation would or would not accommodate them, and the potential impact the WIL placement may have on their health. For example, one undergraduate student who identified as having a medical condition and a physical disability expressed, “I have chronic back pain so it will be hard to work for long hours”. Often the concern of whether they would meet expectations was exacerbated by not knowing how their disability would be perceived or supported by the organisation.

Students also touched on challenges related to the materials aspects of their placement environment such as desks, chairs, lighting and stairs. As one surveyed student shared:

Access issues related to physical disability. Previous workplaces and the university laboratory environment have been quite difficult to navigate for individuals with physical disabilities. The lack of compassion and understanding by (some) demonstrators has been appalling, whereas in

industry this has been completely the opposite. However, access issues are still problematic – stairs, in particular. (Student survey response)

Students expressed concerns about whether potential industry organisations would accept them as equally contributing, yet differently abled, members of the team. A surveyed student indicated they wanted:

to find a workplace that tolerates and appreciates neurodiverse individuals like myself. At times [I may] be unable to correctly manipulate or identify numerical or mathematical functions. The availability of placements are abundant, but I need to find a workplace that can also contextualise to autistic people. (Student survey response)

The surveyed students who had undertaken a placement (n = 43) shared issues with access, having their condition misunderstood or poorly accommodated, and having their conditions or disability exacerbated during their WIL placement. One student, for example, shared a story about their nursing placement, highlighting how their condition was not understood nor accommodated:

I asked about swapping a shift in order to attend a medical appointment, and it was denied. On orientation day they remarked, ‘if a student has a medical appointment that is being booked so far in advance, and cannot be changed, then you probably shouldn’t be on placement’ and also said that placement is about our ‘professional and willingness to attend shifts’ inferring that my medical condition somehow makes me unprofessional and unfit to be on placement. As a result, I had to take a sick day to attend the appointment and will need to make up the hours at a later date and at another hospital as my current placement will not facilitate a shift swap. (Student survey response)

In the focus groups, students shared concerns related to securing a placement, communicating with work colleagues and accessing resources, as well as concerns about how their disability might impact their performance. In terms of securing a placement, a range of challenges were discussed including finding a placement that suited their interest or was located in an easily accessible area. Students were also concerned they would not be accepted on a placement because of their disability. One student explained that one of the challenges in finding a placement was the “fear of not being accepted if honest about disability”. Students also expressed concern about starting a placement, with one participant expecting to feel “anxiety on first day, what people might think/say/do”.

Students also discussed their concerns around communicating with WIL supervisors in relation to their disability. Communicating verbally to others is a particular challenge faced by those with autism, as this student shared:

Because I struggle putting thoughts into words, someone with autism and all that, a lot of them generally are fully direct and upfront or have missed those social cues. (Student focus group response)

Students with anxiety face with verbal communication challenges in WIL placement. One focus group student explained that for them:

a WIL unit is a huge anxiety-inducing experience even before I enrol in the unit. Being unable to effectively communicate with my employer limits me in how much I can achieve in the WIL unit and could even effect whether or not I get chosen over other students. (Student focus group response)

Many of the students discussed the challenges of written communication. For those students with dyslexia, a focus group participant explained that they were concerned this might be an issue in a future WIL placement:

I'll often have to go online to spell check before I handwrite notes and a lot of hospitals have policies of no mobile phone use. I'm going to have to flag. I've had flagged that previously that can I have that exception for that? That was okay in this, in my scenario last year, but because that was a clinic and it was a single practitioner, I'm wondering in a bigger organization if that's going to become a problem. (Student focus group response)

Students' ideas to make WIL placement more inclusive

The student participants in the survey and the focus groups were invited to offer their thoughts and ideas on how WIL placement could be more inclusive for students with disability. The participants were asked to consider what the university could do, what industry could do and also what resources could be made that would be of benefit to students living with disabilities.

Students in the survey and the focus groups suggested that the university provide students with support and preparation before and during WIL placement. Participants suggested that the university might create opportunities for students living with disabilities to have access to someone who provides them with support before and/or during their placement. This supporting/mentoring role could be assigned to either another student or a staff member. For example, one survey participant suggested that students be mentored in a one-on-one arrangement by "other differently-abled students who have been through the subjects already". A participant in a focus group expressed, "I feel like maybe a support group for people with disabilities engaging with each other about their experiences might be really helpful". The supportive role for students could, as suggested by another survey participant, be in the form of a university staff member who offers "counselling or other support services to ensure the student feels completely comfortable and maintains their motivation and success throughout the placement".

The flexibility of WIL placement was also a frequent consideration with students. They expressed a preference for WIL placement to be flexible enough so that it could fit in with students' other work/study/caring commitments. One student suggested that the university could "enable placements over T3 – outside the main learning periods". The flexibility of

WIL placements was also considered as an aspect that would make the WIL experience more accommodating for students in terms of their disability, with one survey respondent reflecting:

For me it's about having flexible hour requirements. So might be 4hrs a day 5 days a week, might be partially online to remove the added discomfort of travel and the ability to rest more frequently and easily. (Student survey response)

In terms of mitigating some of the challenges of students disclosing their disability to industry supervisors or requesting accommodations, focus group students had a range of suggestions for what the university could do to support students before the placement began. One student suggested that the university WIL form that students are required to fill out before placement could have prompting questions such as:

... do you need accommodations? Yes or no. Would you like to disclose this? Yes or no. Would you like someone to reach out? Have you got ideas about what accommodations you may need or would you like someone to talk that through with you? (Student focus group response)

Other suggestions included that the university could inform students of the accommodations that they could ask for while on placement and that the university could communicate with the industry supervisor about the students' needs.

Several students in both the survey and the focus groups suggested that making WIL placement more financially accessible would be one way to make placement more inclusive. Students offered a variety of possible solutions with those from the survey suggesting "scholarships", "paid placements" and "transport assistance". While a student from a focus group wondered if, for an online placement, the university would provide an "allowance because they're [students engaged in WIL placement] obviously going to be using more internet, or those sorts of things".

There were also some suggestions on ways to improve the assessment of placements. These included survey responses that suggested, "for equity's sake, they [students with disability] should not be assessed using the same criteria", "using flexible and compassionate assessment approaches where there is an illness flare up/personal sickness" or a "move away from rubric-based assessments to asking supervisors to provide written feedback. This is far more useful than marking off checkboxes".

Students' suggested resources

Students living with disabilities had many suggestions for new resources and for ways to improve existing resources that are available for students with disability in WIL placement. From the survey responses, students' ideas on ways to improve existing resources included "improve clarity of placement material and make it more concise" and for the inclusion of "closed-captions on videos".

A resource suggested by students in two focus groups (of six) was a placement database, where students could search and compare potential WIL supervisors or locations. Some students suggested that such a database could help students locate a placement near their home and/or compare travel options. As one student suggested:

If there was an available database of places that are willing to do work placements that could be beneficial. That way, you could use it on a radius basis to assess and see the walking distance or what you are willing to travel. (Student focus group response)

Other students built on the idea of an online database, suggesting that it could also be used to book consultations with university staff to discuss potential placements and to store anonymous student reviews of a placement organisation's commitment to inclusion, diversity and equity. In particular, students liked the idea of knowing previous students' reviews on the inclusivity of the organisation as one student noted, "I don't want to be in an organisation where they would look down on people with disabilities" (Student focus group response).

Some students spoke of their own experiences of other students with disability who did not know about which accommodations that they could or should ask for while on placement nor about the existence of a university disability resource office that specifically supports students with disability. Resources to remedy this could be, as a student from the survey suggested, that before placement begins students should be given "a little booklet on our rights, and what we're allowed to ask for on placement", or as a focus group student suggested, that the university should "advertise the changes/accommodations available for the student".

Recommendations for practice

This study recognises that each university has its own unique context and practices around supporting WIL placement. However, findings arising from our study highlight that student participants recommended the following practices or policies to improve inclusion and access in WIL placement:

1. Greater whole-of-journey support for WIL placement

Students living with disabilities suggested that universities should offer more support before, during and after placement to ensure inclusion. For example, students suggested offering pre-placement drop-in sessions (online or in person) either with peers, or with staff from the university's disability and inclusion teams, as an opportunity to share concerns and understand their rights during placement. Students also suggested support during and after the placement to either help mitigate challenges that may arise or to make sense of the experiences after the fact. This aligns with experiential learning theory (ELT), which proposes that learning is best conceived as a holistic process, where students' beliefs and ideas are challenged, learned, relearned and constructed into new knowledge (Boud & Walker, 1990; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Resources that students suggested included videos, podcasts and testimonials of students who had previously done placement, providing an authentic voice and experience for students to learn from and reflect on.

2. Flexibility and personalisation in WIL placement

Students also spoke of the need to consider how flexibility can be better integrated into existing WIL placement practices. For example, offering students the chance to do virtual or blended WIL placement, or allowing for placement activities to be shorter in duration (e.g. 3 hours rather than a full day). Students also recommended a greater focus on how placements could be personalised to the student, in terms of location, the students' skillsets and students' future career goals. In this vein, they also spoke of the creation of databases that might allow for students to search for potential placement organisations themselves and filter based on criteria, including paid or unpaid.

3. Monitor and evaluate inclusion and equity

Finally, findings from our study also suggest that universities could do more to monitor and evaluate inclusion and equity across learning offerings. To illustrate, many students expressed that they did not know what accommodations could be made for them on placement, nor how to broach conversations about accommodations or disclosure with supervisors. In particular, students indicated that practices should only share students' specific accommodations, not their disability or condition, unless otherwise stated by the student. They also suggested that placement supervisors could receive training, or information, on how to support inclusive workplaces, and reminders that legally students do not have to disclose their disability if they do not wish to.

Students also noted that many of the good practices of inclusion now at university had not yet translated into workplaces, such as closed captions, or text that is screen reader friendly, and universities could do more to ensure all placement organisations are aware of these inclusive practices. We therefore recommended that universities collectively explore a shared framework and evaluation to recognise inclusion and equity, identify gaps and recognise good practice.

In our analysis of the findings, we found that many of the students' suggestions and ideas aligned with Principles 7 & 8 of the Best Practice Principles for CDL for students living with disabilities:

- Principle 7: Employers, teaching staff and career practitioners who are disability confident, aware of unconscious bias and with positive attitudes towards diversity and inclusion, create respectful and equitable educational and employment contexts for students with disability.
- Principle 8: Anti-discriminatory, inclusive and accessible career information incorporated in all general career development materials supports awareness of CDL opportunities, resources and networks, as well as how to engage with the networks for students with disability and their supporters.

Conclusion

This study investigated the benefits and challenges faced by students living with disabilities in WIL placement and their ideas for strategies and resources to make WIL more inclusive to students with disability. This study has shown that there are many benefits to engaging in WIL placement for students living with disabilities such as developing and evidencing industry skills, forming future career opportunities and strengthening future career goals, providing students with an understanding of what the daily work of that career might be like, and forming social and professional connections. However, there are also many challenges faced by this cohort such as their concern about how they will meet the expectations of the placement, securing a placement, how the organisation will accommodate them, the potential impact the WIL placement may have on their health, communicating with work colleagues, accessing resources, and issues with access. Strategies and resources to address some of these challenges were suggested by the student participants of this study. These suggestions and ideas have influenced the recommendations of this study for the ways that universities can make WIL placement more inclusive to students with disability and are based on Principle 2, 7 and 8 of the Best Practice Principles for CDL for students with disability.

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