

## **ACEN response to the Consultation for Higher Education Base Funding Review**

Prepared by ACEN National Executive  
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### **Introduction**

Established in 2006, ACEN, the Australian peak body for work integrated learning (WIL) in Australia, is internationally recognised as a leader in WIL practice, curriculum, research and scholarship. The ACEN vision is based on intentional collaboration with stakeholders including higher education sector staff and students, industry partners, community and government representatives.

The objectives of ACEN are to:

- promote and enhance WIL throughout Australia and the Asia Pacific Region
- facilitate the development and sharing of knowledge and practice in WIL for the improvement of the student experience
- enhance partner/industry involvement with the higher and vocational education sectors for the provision of WIL opportunities
- foster and facilitate research and scholarship initiatives in WIL

Therefore ACEN welcomes the opportunity to make a submission on the key question of resourcing of WIL in Australian Universities to the Higher Education Base Funding Review.

### **Background**

Australia is experiencing an expansion of WIL activity in higher education, a change that is supported strongly by Australian peak industry and professional groups as a key mechanism to ensuring industry relevant curriculum and graduates with improved employability skills (A C Nielsen Research Services, 2000; A National Internship Scheme, 2008). The recent Australian Workforce Futures Report (Skills Australia, 2010, p.2) has made a series of recommendations to boost industry/education partnerships and workforce development strategies to lift pedagogical expertise and skills in industry engagement over the 2010 – 2016 period. The report advises that industry expects “both tertiary education and VET sectors to expand work integrated learning to increase the relevance of the learning experience” (p.63). Further the report recognises that “Reorienting education providers to industry outcomes will require a major cultural and professional change for many staff”, claiming that the “significance of this transformation must not be underestimated” (p.63).

Employment outcomes are an accountability indicator for higher education, a measure that is enhanced through the nurturing of employability skills (Knight & Yorke, 2004). Equally there are strong incentives for students to undertake WIL and most higher education institutions have developed policies to guide WIL curriculum and pedagogical development. However there remain resourcing issues that place significant constraints on the capacity of institutions to deliver quality WIL programs required to enhance skill development which will maximise graduates contribution socially and economically to the nation.

*The WIL Report, Work Integrated Learning, A National Scoping Study* (Patrick, Peach & Pocknee, 2009), the first large scale scoping study to identify issues and map the growth of WIL in Australia, highlighted the expansion of WIL beyond traditional discipline areas such as nursing, education and engineering to a wide range of disciplines. It also documented the broadening of approaches to WIL including placements, practicums, project work, and simulated and virtual environments.

The report also identified interconnected challenges facing the sector including:

- Ensuring equity and access to participation in WIL to all students;
- Managing expectations of all the key stakeholders involved including industry, students and higher education;
- Improving communication and coordination between institutions, industry and community;
- Ensuring the quality of WIL experiences;
- Adequately resourcing WIL.

The report identified resourcing issues in relation to WIL at multiple levels including individual student, employer, institutional and at a national level.

## **Resourcing of WIL in Australia**

### ***Q 3.4 What additional costs are involved in the provision of work integrated learning and should these be considered in setting the base funding?***

The Australian Government has a strong commitment to equity, skills development, growth and quality in higher education and acknowledges that skilled professionals are in demand (DEEWR, 2010). Incorporating WIL into the curriculum is integral to higher education producing work ready graduates, thereby addressing the skills shortage agenda and contributing to strong economic growth and sustainability. ACEN, through The WIL Report; subsequent consultations, and through membership feedback considers that the current funding arrangements for WIL in Australian institutions are inadequate. This inadequate resourcing of WIL activities negatively impacts on the capacity of institutions to address the interconnecting challenges identified in The WIL Report. This in turn impacts on WIL approaches adopted, the quality of student experiences and learning outcomes, and the capacity for institutions to maximise industry partnerships.

Delivering quality WIL experiences to students is a key aim of all Australian institutions. According to extensive research conducted in the UK (Harvey, Moon and Geall, 1997) effective and quality work integrated learning programs:

- involve meaningful work
- must be integral to the curriculum
- require induction and clear agreements with all stakeholders
- must be assessed to maximise student engagement
- explicitly link learning outcomes and graduate capabilities i.e. learning is deliberate and intentional
- involve host organisations at all stages of planning
- involve guided reflection and debriefing on work experiences
- require monitoring of quality outcomes

At an institutional level most WIL programs have developed 'ground-up' in schools, departments and faculties, primarily with the aim of giving students an opportunity to apply, consolidate and expand on knowledge gained in their course. That is, WIL programs have developed and evolved within the constraints of available resources. Effective WIL programs involve multiple components with a combination of administrative and academic work. If fees are charged, DEST (now DEEWR) guidelines (2005) for WEI units require that 'support' is offered to students.

As we enter a period in higher education where there is much focus on quality and standards, it is critical to ensure that quality standards inform the funding required for WIL rather than the reverse.

That is, we must ensure that WIL in Australian institutions adhere to internationally accepted best practice and provide at least the following:

- assistance/support to students to find placements (placement search, with some discipline areas having to pay placement providers)
- assessment and approval of placement work as being suitable for the course/profession
- preparation of the host organisation for involvement in WIL
- preparation of students for placement (generic and discipline specific preparation)
- ensuring compliance e.g. OH&S and duty of care
- providing academic supervision
- developing assessment practices that make WIL a 'learning' experience rather than 'work' experience
- evaluating the WIL experience by all stakeholders i.e. host organisations in addition to students.

While assessment and academic supervision are standard academic activities, they are far more complex and challenging in a WIL context (Cooper, Orrell & Bowden, 2010). It is critical to ensure assessment practices are rigorous, fair and equitable and comprehensive moderation processes are in place. Assessing WIL incorporates occupational health and safety risks, employer relationships and frequent off campus activities. Scrutinising assessment strategies across the higher education sector is presently high on the agenda for institutions. ACEN has noted an increasing focus by members in building professional skills in this area. Intensive professional development and capability building for WIL staff in these areas will require significant resource allocation.

Engaging with industry partners for WIL activities is a time intensive and sensitive task requiring resources and people with appropriate skills. Monitoring and maintaining relationships which ensure quality WIL experiences and positive student outcomes is critical to the success of such programs. The nurturing of partner relationships minimises the risks associated with WIL through communication which ensures legislative requirements are addressed and risk mitigation strategies implemented.

For the purposes of accountability and to inform practice, it is essential that WIL experiences are evaluated from a student, staff and institutional perspective. This requires data collection, analysis and dissemination of information, all of which are resource intensive activities. The collection and analysis of robust data enables opportunities for national and international benchmarking thus facilitating informed practice based on evidence and standards. Through the evaluation of WIL experiences, benefits for students, staff, employers and other stakeholders are maximised.

The activities outlined above are resource intensive and additional to standard teaching and curriculum development and apply only to WIL activities. A recent report (Bates, 2010) examined workload issues in relation to WIL at Griffith University. The report concludes that the responsibilities of WIL academic and professional staff are more extensive and onerous than those for other courses. This is particularly the case in courses that involve work placement where the administrative and management load is greater than it is for more traditional class-room based teaching and learning activities.

Current funding models do not adequately resource these activities. In addition, identifying ways in which WIL programs can be designed so that they are both scalable (to allow as many students as possible to engage) and sustainable (to ensure longevity of those programs) are issues that are yet to be addressed in any systematic way.

In 2008 and 2009, Victoria University engaged Price Waterhouse Coopers (2009) to undertake an extensive project aimed at estimating the cost implications of designing, implementing and sustaining WIL activities in all courses at VU. A series of case studies identified the additional costs associated

with implementing various WIL models at VU. The report identified that placements incurred approximately 21% additional costs to standard teaching activity with significant additional costs associated with building partnerships with host organisations, structuring learning activities and placing and supervising students. For project based learning in the workplace and community, the report identified 15% additional costs to standard teaching activity again associated with building partnerships, structuring learning and supervision of students.

As noted in The Higher Education Base Funding Review Background Paper (2010, p.13) the number of university courses involving WIL is increasing significantly. The Background Paper notes a doubling since 2007 of the number of academic staff at Flinders University involved in the coordination, management, supervision and teaching of WIL courses. From ACEN's knowledge of the growth of WIL in Australia this is indicative of a sector-wide trend.

Audits conducted by Flinders University (Cooper et al., 1999; Smiegel & Harris.; 2008) highlight critical issues in relation to resourcing WIL including lack of recognition of the amount of work and skills required to run successful WIL programs, clerical and administrative assistance required, status of staff involved, staff professional development and career opportunities.

The evidence provided here supports the need for increased resourcing for real and anticipated growth in WIL activities. Only through increased resourcing will stakeholders have the capacity to provide quality WIL experiences that maximise student and industry engagement. Recognition and resourcing of the complex administrative and academic work involved in WIL and the need for significant professional development is essential if issues of benchmarking, scalability and sustainability are to be addressed (Patrick, Peach & Pocknee, 2009, p.34).

### **What are the repercussions of this level of inadequate funding for WIL in Australian Universities?**

Inadequate funding of WIL in Australian Universities directly impacts on WIL programs and all stakeholders involved: students, industry partners, community and institutions.

For students, there are a range of implications ranging from financial considerations, engagement with learning, the development of employability skills, and finally to graduate outcomes. The "AUSSE [Australasian Survey of Student Engagement] shows that students who do work experience or an industry placement report significantly higher engagement and outcomes than those who don't" (ACER Higher Education Update February 2011, p.13).

Results from the 2009 AUSSE, (ACER 2010) confirm that students from lower socio economic status backgrounds gain from involvement in a number of learning activities that enhance engagement, including work integrated learning. Therefore, WIL is an important strategy to not only enhance graduate skills but ensuring cohorts such as first in family, mature age and lower socio economic background students are engaged with, and successful in their studies (Brimble et al.,2010). Nevertheless it is evident that some groups of students currently have less access to WIL than others. The 2009 AUSSE confirms inequities in participation in work integrated learning with international students, students speaking a language other than English at home, students with a disability, and students experiencing socio economic disadvantage all have lower levels of involvement.

The sector is challenged to provide equitable access to WIL with a range of factors impacting on this goal. The financial cost to students of involvement with WIL was highlighted in The WIL Report with one Queensland university providing a bursary program to support students undertaking practicums. (Patrick, Peach & Pocknee, 2009 P27) In response to this concern ACEN have established WIL Scholarships and the large numbers of applicants (500 applicants in 2011) is evidence that many students faced financial hardship in undertaking WIL in Australia.

It is well established that some student cohorts require additional support and preparation to undertake WIL successfully. At present, often the resources required to provide this assistance is not available and can severely impact on students capability to undertake WIL. The Australian Government's aim of increasing the availability and participation in higher education by a broader cross section of students over the coming years will inevitably exacerbate this current situation. Additional resources for WIL to ensure equitable access to WIL by all students will be required to support and achieve this social inclusion goal.

Several reports (Precision Consulting, 2007; Patrick, Peach & Pocknee, 2009; Skills Australia, 2010) have identified the need for improved liaison between industry and institutions in relation to work integrated learning. Employers are concerned by the complexity of communicating with institutions and the absence of information about how to engage with work integrated learning (Patrick, Peach & Pocknee, 2009). The lack of adequate resources results in patchy liaison with industry and community which further jeopardises the quality of student learning outcomes and the development of strong partnerships with host organisations.

Further evidence of the need for enhanced engagement between higher education and industry is a recent partnership between the Innovative Research Universities and Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry around WIL with an explicit aim to improve links between the university sector and the business community; raise the awareness of WIL generally; and to encourage the availability of placements hosted by members of the business community (IRUA / ACCI Work Integrated Learning, 2011, p.4). Extensive consultation with industry in the development of the soon to be launched, National WIL Portal (Bufton, 2010) a DEEWR funded project, also confirms the need for mechanisms to improve this engagement. However in order for these national initiatives to succeed, adequate funding at the institutional level is required to staff WIL programs adequately and build the capacity and skills of professional and academic staff to maximise the impact of such initiatives.

Another major repercussion of this lack of adequate funding is constant concern expressed by ACEN academic and professional staff members about the lack of recognition of their workload. These issues were raised in The WIL Report (2009) and also at the ACEN Research Symposium held in Perth in 2010. In its 2007 'Audit of Work Integrated Learning Programs' Flinders University also noted major concern in the lack of appropriate recognition in the management of WIL activities in staff workloads, resulting in "a tendency to employ sessional staff to undertake supervision and assessment of students and to manage the interaction with industry partners" (p.16). This gave rise to a formal recommendation for the university to develop a consistent approach to WIL workload allocation and recognition amongst university staff. This was in turn reflected in the Flinders University 'Work-Integrated Learning Policy', approved in 2010 which underpins all new and existing WIL activities at Flinders'. Similar concerns regarding workload in relation to WIL were identified at Griffith University. Bates (2010) found that WIL staff showed genuine commitment to WIL but they tended to experience a sense of being marginalised in higher education and often experienced high workloads.

Additional activities that are not accommodated adequately in the current funding to universities are the administrative systems required for WIL programs; professional development for both professional and academic staff; and resource development. These activities, at both discipline and university levels, are required to maintain the quality of the programs on offer and minimise the risk to participating students.

Evidence provided here outlines the current significant impacts on all stakeholders involved resulting from inadequate levels of funding for WIL in Australia. This situation will be exacerbated both as the number of disciplines and universities incorporating WIL into courses increases and through the

involvement of a broader cross section of students, many of whom will require additional assistance to participate successfully.

## **Conclusion**

Work Integrated Learning is an acknowledged strategic direction in most Australian universities and specifically featured in strategic and operational plans. Consequently there has been a significant expansion nationally in WIL programs, well beyond traditional disciplines with long standing practices in this area. This growth has been characterised by innovation and creativity, resulting in diverse approaches in Australia that are internationally recognised. WIL provides rich and relevant learning through a partnership between institutions and employers that positively impacts on student learning graduate outcomes, universities, industry and community. Provision of quality WIL programs involves a holistic range of activities that go beyond standard teaching. However the current funding arrangements do not allow adequate resourcing of these activities. Inadequate funding presents a range of particular challenges that impacts on the breadth and quality of WIL programs and directly affects outcomes for all stakeholders. These current challenges will increase and become more complex with further expansion of WIL into more courses, into new disciplines and with increased participation by students from educationally disadvantaged groups and international students.

ACEN strongly urges the Australian Government to significantly increase the funding provided to institutions to support WIL activities in order to optimise the contribution that graduates make to Australia's economic growth and social goals.

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<http://www.iru.edu.au/our-activities/projects.aspx>

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