



Australian Collaboration Education Network

Response to

Review of Australian Higher Education
Discussion Paper

1st August 2008

ACEN Secretariat:
Fleur Webb,
Australian Collaborative Education Network,
Technology Building,
Nathan Campus,
Griffith University.
Phone: 07 3735 5208
f.webb@griffith.edu.au
www.acen.edu.au

Emailed to: HEReview@deewr.gov.au

Australian Collaborative Education Network

ACEN is a network of practitioners and researchers involved in work integrated learning (WIL) in Australia. WIL currently exists in various forms including internships, cooperative education, work placements, community based learning, clinical rotations, in-class simulations, and sandwich years and is the umbrella term that encapsulates experiences which help university students integrate the theory of the classroom with professional work place practices. ACEN provides peer support and opportunities to share good practice in WIL on a national level with associated international links.

ACEN provides peer support to its network and opportunities to share good practice in WIL on state and national levels with associated international links and is currently the lead organisation for a project for the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) to scope WIL in Australia and to develop a national framework for initiatives to support good practice in WIL. This project has identified that employers engage with Universities to access WIL students as a response to skills shortages and recruitment needs.

ACEN has over 400 nationally registered members with an additional 100 members who have registered at state-levels making a total membership of around 500. These members represent every state and almost all Australian universities and therefore represent the extensive range of WIL programs currently being run across Australian universities. There are WIL programs run in Australian universities across most discipline areas at undergraduate and postgraduate level, in varying formats.

ACEN Mission

To lead the advancement of Work Integrated Learning in Australia through collaboration with the Higher and Vocational Education sectors, students, industry, community and government.

ACEN exists to:

- Enhance the student learning experience
- Recognise and promote excellence in work integrated learning including curriculum, scholarship, research, innovation and evaluation.
- Facilitate exchange of information and sharing of knowledge relevant to work integrated learning
- Promote co-operative partnerships between industry and educational institutions, students and governments both nationally and internationally.

Background

There is an increasing national and international focus on the demand from employers for students to acquire work-ready skills during their tertiary programs, and a number of important national papers and reviews have been published recently which emphasise the role of (WIL) in building those skills. Universities across Australia have been active in responding to these employer demands and WIL has become one of the most vigorous areas in Learning and Teaching, with the majority of Australian universities now engaging with WIL. (*2007 National Internship Scheme Discussion Paper, the 2008 National Review of Career Development Services in Tertiary Institutions and the 2007 BIHECC Graduate Employability Skills report.*)

In 2007/2008 there have been two important papers and one review addressing this point, namely:

- The 2007 BIHECC Graduate Employability Skills Report
- The Universities Australia National Internship Scheme (NIS) Position Paper May 2008
- National Review of Career Development Services in Tertiary Education (final report due shortly)

In addition there have been two Australian Learning & Teaching grants for Work Integrated Learning (WIL) awarded through the Discipline Based Initiatives (DBI), to the Australian Collaborative Education Network (ACEN) and the National Association of Graduate Career Advisory Services (NAGCAS). There were also two DBI grants in associated areas, namely for e-portfolios awarded to QUT and for graduate attributes to UNSW.

Discussion Points:

Discussion Point 2:

Are there impediments to the higher education sector being able to innovate in the development of courses and programs? What are these impediments and how could they be removed?

A major impediment is the affordability of establishing new and innovative curriculum and programs to meet the changing needs of the community as evidenced through employer demands. Employers now demand students who are work-ready, and providing work-ready graduates means strong mutually beneficial partnerships need to be developed between employers and the universities to assist students to develop work-ready skills. This sort of engagement implies the need for new and different resources beyond the “chalk and talk” mass instruction methods. Government must recognise that innovative learning and teaching methods require additional resources if community needs are to be met. In 2005, the ability of universities to provide a variety of experiences that engaged students with the workplace, especially as a co-curricular activity, was curtailed by the new definitions which define Work Experience in Industry (WEI). While this legislation refocused Universities on ensuring they provided direction in WEI experiences, it also ensured an additional resource implications in terms of academic time in supervision. (REFERENCE) The time taken to set up WIL opportunities and provide quality monitoring of students on placements exceeds that normally required for in-class activities, and a national system is required for being able to provide adequate supervision and monitoring of students engaged in WIL activities.

ACEN recommends that :

- Resources be provided to Universities to keep abreast of new technologies and take advantage of national and international work placement opportunities through meeting those increased operating costs
- Government funding (GCS) be relaxed to provide greater flexibility to pursue opportunities for students to obtain work experience that informs their learning, and is supervised and supported by the University but may not be directed.
- Government legislation enable international students to take full advantage of WIL opportunities.
- A national WIL student management system be funded and implemented.

Discussion Point 3:

Mechanisms for ensuring HE meets national and local needs for high level skills

WIL provides an excellent mechanism for ensuring graduates are more work-ready and at the same time, many WIL programs also provide short-term solutions for employer needs, while at the same time, improving the chance that students will become members of the relevant profession on graduation. (*Views of Final Year Engineering Students.*)

Strong, mutually beneficial partnerships with employers and the professions are developed through WIL experiences. As the student moves between the University and the workplace, a reciprocal transfer of knowledge occurs, and relationships between the University and the workplace or place of practice are strengthened, with the result that other knowledge sharing and transfer opportunities are enabled.

Consultations with industry, students and Higher Education providers and experiences of ACEN members indicate the following general issues to facilitate these partnerships:

- Need for mechanisms to enable easier access to universities
- Greater coordination of response to industry partners by universities are required
- Lack of resources to administer WIL programs in universities
- Increased communication between industry and universities is required
- Resources to support industry engagement in WIL programs
- Need for systems to effectively manage WIL Placements
- Incentives for industry to become involved in WIL

Strategies are also required to address issues relating to:

International students

- Support to universities to enable the implementation focused programs to support international students to more effectively become involved in WIL programs
- Incentives to industry to involve international students

Increased mobility

- Increase in International WIL exchanges through additional support for students
- Development of systematic national exchange WIL programs between countries

Rural and regional

- Incentives to encourage students to undertake WIL in rural and regional locations

ACEN is broadly supportive of the recommendations from the BIHEC and Universities Australia reports for an increase in opportunities for WIL, and for national support mechanisms.

The nine recommendations of the 2007 BIHECC Report are all valid and would help to meet national and local needs for high level skills. Of particular importance are recommendations to:

1. establish an employability strategy fund for universities to review their work on developing employability skills and address gaps.
2. explicitly identify employability skills in all university curriculum. This would permit students and staff to have a better understanding of career opportunities after graduation.
3. improve and increase access to Work Integrated Learning (WIL). Streamlining WIL processes and increasing WIL access would help employers to meet short term skills shortages. The National Internship Scheme reinforces this recommendation and states that there should be “a commitment by the Commonwealth Government to take a more active role in promoting an expansion of internships and WIL to address Australia’s skill shortages and to improve linkages between university study and workforce readiness”.
4. encourage businesses to provide structured cadetships. Again the NIS recommends that there be a “commitment by Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments to lead by example by adopting a strategic approach to the expansion of internship opportunities within their own departments and agencies”.

ACEN recommends that :

- Increased resources be made available to Universities to support WIL programs in Australian universities
- That a National Internship Scheme be implemented
- Recommendations of the BIHECC Graduate Employability Skills be funded
- That incentives be created to support take up of Industry / community in WIL programs
- A national portal be established to more effectively link industry and universities nationally.

Discussion Point 5:

Examples of good practice for rapid response to skill shortages or successful initiatives to improve generic skills

All Australian universities have statements of generic skills and attributes, and endeavour to embed them within the curriculum. However, for students to develop industry-ready skills, their involvement in industry/professional practice is critical. Most universities have WIL programs that link employers with students. In many cases this relieves a short term staffing need and frequently leads to ongoing employment and provides one of the most powerful mechanisms for students to develop and improve generic skills. Where WIL programs are embedded in the curriculum, they also engage a broad number of academic staff as supervisors, further enhancing dialogue between the discipline and employers.

There are a broad range of examples of WIL good practice where universities partner with industry to provide programs. Case studies can be found at acen.edu.au, and at <http://www.usq.edu.au/nagcascarrickproject/>.

An example of outcomes from WIL which immediately impact recruitment needs is demonstrated by the UWS placement programs which have been running for 13

years and have documented feedback from employers and students which indicates an overwhelmingly high rate of satisfaction by all participants. Anecdotal evidence indicates that over 60% of students gain ongoing work based on their placements.

Evidence of the value of WIL in enabling generic skills development was demonstrated in the Griffith Graduate project.

| | Engineering students with WIL | Engineering Students without WIL |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Generic Skills are important in the workplace. | 98% | 100% |
| University teaching staff made me aware of the importance of generic skills and abilities for my future career. | 57.5% | 39% |
| At University it seemed more important for career prospects to acquire content knowledge than generic skills and abilities. | 43.6% | 63.4% |
| My university undergraduate degree did provide sufficient opportunities to develop generic skills and abilities. | 87.5% | 51.2% |
| The workplace was so different from university that it was hard to transfer generic skills and abilities when I started employment. | 53.6% | 74.2% |

Table 1: Griffith Graduate Stages 4 and 5 comparisons of Engineering Students with and without WIL (as a full-time, full-semester placement) in their final year. This data was collected as a reflection from engineering graduates who had been in the workplace as graduate employees for two years. (Patrick, C. & Crebert, G)

ACEN recommends that :

- WIL be recognised as a valuable contributor to developing generic skills in university degrees and be resourced appropriately.

Discussion Point 26

Are knowledge transfer and community engagement legitimate and appropriate roles for contemporary HE institutions? If so how do you see this additional role for the HE sector blending with its traditional roles and the limits to these additional roles

ACEN supports community engagement as an important context in which WIL can take place. These contexts provide both valuable sites for learning but also additionally provides thousands of students with valuable insights into citizenship through involvement in the community sector.

WIL programs provide valuable mechanisms for knowledge transfer as students provide current knowledge and skills into workplaces during work integrated learning experiences. Research into factors motivating involvement by community / industry in WIL programs identifies keeping abreast of up to date knowledge as one of the factors for Industry involvement.

Success for these knowledge transfer and community engagement activities needs to be based on the development of in depth partnerships with industry focused on achieving mutually beneficial outcomes for all stakeholders. Adequate resourcing to

enable sufficient staffing is critical to achieving this outcome. Current funding levels in Universities are a barrier to achieving this.

ACEN Recommends:

- That Universities be resourced to engage in the broad range of WIL opportunities that enable students to engage in employer and community organisations as part of their degree.

Conclusion

Work Integrated Learning is a powerful learning and teaching opportunity that engages students with the community of employers and community organisations and develops work-ready skills. Universities have responded to employer demands that students be more work-ready as graduates but strong partnerships between Universities and Employers are requisite to strong WIL programs that enable the broadest array of student involvement. WIL is a resource-intensive method of learning, and needs to be adequately resourced if it is to fulfil its potential to prepare graduates and be a response to skills shortages.

References

Business Industry and Higher Education Collaboration Council (BIHECC) (August 2007) "Graduate Employability Skills, Commissioned Report", Canberra.

McLennan, B & Keating, S (2008) "Work-Integrated Learning (Wil) In Australian Universities: The Challenges of Mainstreaming WIL" ALTC NAGCAS Symposium - Melbourne

Patrick,C-J, & Crebert, G. (2004b). A whole new ball-game: Generic skills in an engineering school - are they taught, or merely caught? Paper presented at the International Lifelong Learning Conference, Yeppoon, Central Queensland, Australia, 13-16 June, 2004

Report of a survey of final year university engineering students in Australia. Australian Government. Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. 2008.
http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/publications_resources/profiles/views_engineering_students.htm)

Universities Australia, G. (2007) "A National Internships Scheme: Discussion Paper" Universities Australia, Canberra