Building Institutional Capacity to Enhance Access and Participation in Work-Integrated Learning (WIL)

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The diversity of the student population within Australian and New Zealand universities has changed dramatically across recent decades due to greater focus on policies of social inclusion, widening participation and the massification of higher education (Leach, 2013). At the same time there has been a movement towards increased student participation in work-integrated learning programs, with some universities (see for example Griffith University, Flinders University, and Victoria University strategic plans) setting requirements for all programs to have some form of work-integrated learning opportunity. Work-integrated learning opportunities have been shown to be beneficial for students seeking graduate employment (Jackson, 2014), improving student retention and academic performance (Gamble, Patrick, & Peach, 2010) and for guiding the development of professional identity (Campbell, 2009). A disconnect exists, though, between the benefits of work-integrated learning and the capacity for diverse student populations to fully access, participate and engage with these opportunities. This paper presents an exploration of this challenge for higher education outlining an argument for the further exploration of these.

THE VALUE OF WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING

Critical to the success of students transitioning from university to the workplace is the development of well-developed generic capacities going beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries of skills and knowledge. This presents a challenge to universities to design and deliver curricula to meet these expectations (*Higher Education Base Funding Review: Final Report*, 2011). WIL plays an important role in the education‑to‑employment transition of students. WIL can lead to positive results for students in preparation for the workplace, access to employment and broadening perspectives of career and life possibilities (Smith, Torjul, Brooks, Tyler, & McIlveen, 2009). WIL is instrumental in the realisation of graduate outcomes and the development of graduates who are responsive to the 'real-world' through the application of theoretical knowledge to authentic situations (Patrick, Peach, & Pocknee, 2009). Participation in WIL can also open up new opportunities and future employment for students from diverse backgrounds by leveraging the social and cultural capital of the university (i.e., by working in partnership with professional bodies and industry WIL enhances opportunities for all students) allowing students access into previously inaccessible professional worlds (Jackson, 2014). However, WIL practices that lack flexibility and are not underpinned by principles of inclusive practice can exacerbate disadvantage (Orrell, 2011; Patrick et al., 2009).

For the past twenty years the education sector in both Australia, and a range of other countries, has been guided by an equity policy framework and a view that education should be inclusive, providing *all* students with a meaningful experience (Hockings, 2010; James et al., 2008). In recent times, particularly since the Bradley Review (2008), Australian higher education has been challenged by increased diversity of student cohorts, larger student populations and a widening participation agenda that has introduced the possibility of higher education attainment to broader cohorts. Subsequently inclusive education, within the context of higher education has moved beyond the single idea of access, or the view of 'just get disadvantaged students through the door', to regarding educational inclusion as a more complex issue, focused on successful student participation, progression and completion of studies (Hockings, 2010; James et al., 2008). The Australian higher education sector has directed considerable attention, for both social justice and pragmatic reasons, to this broader view of inclusive education.

Inclusive education, and inclusive educational practice, is not a new approach to teaching and learning. Instead it has developed over the last half-century in response to the increasing demands in education to be responsive to diverse student populations. Inclusive education intends for a movement away from the labelling of individual students around particular deficits, to an appreciation, and responsiveness, to diverse and individual needs of all students (Daniels & Garner, 1999). Underlying constructs of inclusive education are concepts of creating learning experiences that can be accessed by all students. By responding only to students with a particular label (for example impairment or particular disability) there is a tendency to ignore the other range of needs of students and also to ignore the multiplicity of disadvantage (e.g., students with physical disabilities may also come from low socio-economic backgrounds, and under-represented cultural groups). Instead inclusive education implies an appreciation of the unique diversity of all students. By adopting the deficit model of responding to diverse students, what emerges is an attempt to supplement practice with additional supports targeted to particular groups of students; a constant adding-on of resources and approaches (Kift, 2009). Instead inclusive education challenges teachers and educational providers to rethink pedagogies and practices to ensure that all students, no matter what their particular individual needs may be, are able to fully participate in all forms of education (Daniels & Garner, 1999).

Inclusive practice in higher education can be considered to be influential at four different organisational levels, namely, institutional, policy, procedural and practice, and is conceived and discussed in a range of ways including: access and equity, participation, diversity, affirmative action, disadvantage etc. Responding to more diverse student populations requires reconsiderations of classroom, as well as institutional practices, which may be grounded in constructs of a perceived normal, which is exclusionary to any student who differs to this. Within higher education there is a need to evolve new policies that inform and shape procedures and practices which make the institution, as a whole, more responsive to the needs of the whole student, re-imagining what we mean by equity and going beyond limiting equity categories (Gale, 2009). Inclusive education advocates a holistic view of students and their lives. It recognises that both a student's circumstances as well as institutional processes can influence successful engagement with higher education (Benson, Hewitt, Devos, Crosling, & Heagney, 2013). Gale (2009, p. 11) suggests a focus on the following three dimensions as a way to frame the social justice aspect of diversity and inclusive education in a more "robust" way:

   i.   Students are appreciated for who they are and how they identify themselves
   ii. Opportunities exist for students to make knowledge contributions as well as develop their skills and understandings
   iii. Students are provided with genuine opportunities to shape their learning environments and experiences.

This type of framing also draws attention back to the issue of learning, and that all capable students should have equal access and opportunity to fully participate in all pedagogical strategies employed by universities, including access to WIL opportunities.

While there is a large body of research on inclusive education, research directed to inclusive WIL is in its infancy, both in Australia and abroad. Recently, Australian WIL practitioners have begun to take the lead on revealing the scale, depth and complexity of the issue of inclusive WIL, particularly in relation to the placement model. For example, the cost of WIL to students, the role of partners and a broader conceptualisation of WIL beyond the placement model, all feature as emerging challenges and opportunities for inclusive WIL. Moore, Ferns, and Peach's (2012) review of a WIL scholarship program reveals the financial burden presented to students who want or need to undertake a placement. The location and structure of WIL, if it involves for example an extended full-time block, appears to exacerbate the financial challenges experienced by students. However, the burdens and barriers to inclusive WIL are not just located in the domain of the student.

Key stakeholders and partners in the WIL experience provide important elements of the constructed norms that exclude particular students, especially where a student does not fit within the idealised form desired by the workplace partner. Mackaway, Winchester-Seeto, and Rowe (2013, p. 3) label this issue as partner 'push back', defining this as "where a partner expresses a preference for a particular type of student to the exclusion of all others" which can make it difficult to negotiate quality placements for diverse cohorts of students. Involvement in WIL offers many benefits to organisations, including the opportunity to "screen potential employees, complete projects that would have otherwise lapsed, reduce costs of employment and training, and provide positive links with the university" (Cullen, 2005, p. 5). In advocating the agenda universities may sanction, unintentionally, an organisation's right to choose which students they offer placements to without considering the potential access and equity implications for their growing cohort of diverse students. Therefore, while the university may aspire to provide inclusive WIL, there is dependence on workplace partners sharing similar views and goals to achieve this aspiration.

Ongoing stakeholder debates over curriculum design, models of WIL, educational standards, the work-readiness of graduates and how this can be best achieved in nurse education (Nash, 2012), information technology (Koppi et al., 2013) and the built environment (Savage, Davis, & Miller, 2010). These debates reflect "a fundamental tension between the different perspectives of various stakeholders regarding the essential 'purpose' of students' [WIL] experience" (Nash, 2012, p. 7). This tension is not isolated to the industry-university stakeholder partnership, but also extends to the partnerships with students. What students bring to WIL plays a significant part in how successfully they engage with this approach to learning and teaching. Research by Carter, Winchester-Seeto, & Mackaway (2014) identifies three main student centred factors; namely, personal circumstances, personal attributes and experience with the world, which influence inclusive WIL, reflecting both the situational and dispositional nature of barriers. Responses to these student factors are also a key concern in evolving inclusive WIL curriculum models.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The above discussion highlights the challenges that present in the junction between an increasingly diverse student cohort and the benefits of engagement in work-integrated learning. There is a pressing need to explore these challenges and to better understand and articulate key principles and guidelines that can better inform inclusive practices in work-integrated learning. Currently the authors are engaged in a funded project that will respond to these challenges exploring key principles and insights. Within institutions, however, there is also opportunity for localised responses to these often forgotten barriers to engagement and success in work-integrated learning.

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