

**Work-integrated learning courses: An essential component for preparing students to work in statutory child protection?**

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# Work-integrated learning courses: An essential component for preparing students to work in statutory child protection?

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Undergraduate programs can play an important role in the development of individuals wanting professional employment within statutory child protection agencies: both the coursework and the work-integrated learning (WIL) components of degrees have a role in this process. This paper uses a collective case study methodology to examine the perceptions and experiences of first year practitioners within a specific statutory child protection agency in order to identify whether they felt prepared for their current role. The sample of 20 participants came from a range of discipline backgrounds with just over half of the sample (55%) completing a WIL placement as part of their undergraduate studies. The results indicate that while some participants were able to identify and articulate specific benefits from their undergraduate coursework studies, all participants who had undertaken a WIL placement as part of their degree believed the WIL placement was beneficial for their current work. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 2013 14(1), 45-58).

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In a number of undergraduate discipline areas universities help prepare students for graduate employment. However, despite this, many graduates report they feel underprepared for the workplace (Newton & McKenna, 2007; Smith & Pilling, 2007). In the statutory child protection field, Healy and Meagher's (2007) research identified that universities play a significant role in preparing individuals for what can be the difficult and challenging work associated with the child protection field. They found that although graduates left university with generic skills that could be applied in any workplace context, the graduates carried high anxiety about their ability to cope with the work. Healy and Meagher suggested that this anxiety could be decreased if students had more exposure to knowledge and frameworks about child abuse during their undergraduate training. Significantly, Meagher, Cortis and Healy (2008) identified that graduates who had completed a work-integrated learning (WIL) subject believed that this had assisted them in the preparation for their transition into the role of child protection worker. The importance of a WIL placement in a statutory child protection agency was supported by Balfour and Neff (1993) who reported that those graduates who had completed such a WIL placement were more likely to stay in the child protection field than those who had not. They argued that graduates who had not completed a WIL placement in a statutory child protection organization were not as aware of their professional role and responsibilities and therefore they had unrealistic expectations of the job. These are important findings given that many organizations within the statutory child protection field are now facing significant recruitment and retention problems (Healy, 2009).

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However, not all researchers believe that it is beneficial or appropriate for students to complete a WIL placement in a statutory child protection agency. Drury-Hudson (1999) stated that a WIL placement was difficult for students who were ill-equipped to cope with the demands and complexity of child protection work. She believed that a student's limited understanding of the legislative, organizational and policy contexts within which a statutory child protection agency operated required additional capabilities associated with personal attributes and maturity. She claimed that universities did not devote sufficient time for students to develop a sound understanding of the function of those agencies that have a statutory responsibility in the field of child protection. Drury-Hudson (1999) argued that if students did not have a strong foundation and a solid understanding of the agency, including any legislative and subsequent policy mandates, this lack placed them in a vulnerable position, which left the student becoming more focused on the day-to-day tasks of surviving the WIL placement rather than thriving and continuing to develop a strong foundation for their future professional practice. While universities do spend time preparing students for WIL, most of this is general in nature and is aimed at developing the generic and transferable skills of students (Agllias, 2010; Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick, & Cragolini, 2004a, 2004b; Miller & Robb, 1997).

Smith and Pilling (2007), in their Australian research on allied health professionals, argued that preparedness for the workplace required students and graduates to have an understanding of the external political influences and the environment, and possess time management, critical thinking, self reflection and effective team skills. They believed these were crucial qualities for students and graduates to possess if they were to become skilled and effective professionals (Smith & Pilling, 2007). However, the notion of transitioning students and graduates into the workplace is a problematic one for many professions due to the mismatch between an individual's expectations of the role and the realities of practice (Smith & Pilling). This is particularly so in the field of statutory child protection because of the sheer diversity of child protection work and the immediacy of the decisions that need to be made. This means that students can develop 'reality shock,' characterized by stress, value conflicts and role uncertainty (Greensmith & Blumfield, 1989; Sutton & Griffin, 2000). There is evidence to suggest that this mismatch has been attributed to a theory-practice divide: individuals have limited or no exposure to the realities of practice during their coursework and are exposed to poor role models in the workplace while having unrealistic expectations of the work (Tryssenarr & Perkins, 2001).

Although Drury-Hudson's concerns were particularly related to statutory child protection contexts, other literature (Bates, Bates, & Bates, 2007; Bates, 2004, 2008; Coll & Eames, 2000) has identified that a good supervisor/supervisee fit promotes an optimum learning environment for students within a WIL context. The university can facilitate this WIL process by ensuring that there is a sufficient preparation phase prior to the student undertaking the WIL placement (Bates et al., 2007; Bates, 2008; Raschick, Maypole, & Day, 1998). The potential of WIL to develop opportunities for a supervisor to mentor a student for future transition into a professional field is established if the supervisor has an in-depth knowledge of the organization, the work the student is going to undertake, and most importantly, a knowledge of the student's skills and abilities in order to foster appropriate learning opportunities.

Irrespective of the WIL placement context, a number of authors have identified that the experience of a placement while studying at university enhances the potential for students to move into that area of work post-graduation (Alperin, 1998; Crebert et al., 2004a; Rome,

1997). This paper reports on one part of a larger study into the transition of graduates in the first year of employment within a statutory child protection organization. The research question for this paper asks how undergraduate degrees, including those with a WIL component, prepare students for professional work in the statutory child protection sector.

### *Queensland Context*

Statutory child protection workers in Queensland have a responsibility to investigate allegations of possible abuse or neglect of children who are aged under 18 years (Queensland Department of Child Safety, 2009). Where possible, these workers aim to work closely with the families to maintain the family unit while at the same time implementing and facilitating appropriate supports and services to ensure the safety of the child. However, there are situations where children and young people need to be removed from the family home for their own safety. In these cases, the statutory child protection worker prioritizes placing them with other family members or significant others. If this is not possible, the child will be placed in foster care (Queensland Department of Child Safety). This means that the role is complex and the significant responsibilities on the employees of the statutory child protection agency demands that they have a particularly high level of interpersonal skills and an ability to respond to immediate and unexpected events, in addition to specific theoretical knowledge. Over the past 30 years, there has been an increasing public awareness of child protection issues that has heightened the sensitive and political nature of the work. Therefore, it is essential that workers become aware of their role, responsibilities, duties and functions as soon as possible after commencing employment (Brian, 2007).

An inquiry initiated in 2004, as a result of the number of children being abused in foster care, identified that a significant number of staff members at the frontline were not equipped with the necessary skills to undertake the duties of the position effectively (Crime and Misconduct Commission, 2004). Several other authors have noted that a lack of experienced personnel has resulted in recruitment that increasingly depends on graduates, who are most frequently female and recruited immediately after they have completed their undergraduate training (Davies, 2006; Gould, 1998; Morris, 2005). Therefore, it is critical that undergraduate programs effectively prepare students for a complex and difficult role which will often require them as statutory child protection workers to undertake two roles simultaneously: *legally empowered social control agent and relationship-based social support and change agent* (McPherson & Barnett, 2006, p. 193).

### METHOD

This study used a collective case study methodology informed by an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm to assess how undergraduate degrees, including those with a WIL component, prepare students for professional employment in the statutory child protection sector. A collective case study allows for the investigation of several cases within a clearly identified group of participants who share similar characteristics so that findings regarding specific instances can be coordinated and compared (Stake, 2005). The process of the investigation, which in this case was semi-structured interviews, provided the opportunity for the individual differences and similarities to be identified through the narratives provided. This choice of methodology allowed the collection of data that provided a picture of the experiences of a graduate transitioning from a student to practitioner within the context of a dynamic statutory child protection agency.

### *Sample*

Participants in this case study were selected purposively based on the following criteria. They had to be:

- a statutory child protection worker employed in the Queensland Department of Child Safety; and
- employed in one of the 25 urban offices of this Department in Brisbane or the greater metropolitan area; and
- a graduate who completed a primary university degree immediately before appointment; and
- engaged in this particular work as their first professional employment after graduation.

The Queensland Department of Child Safety provided the researcher with a list of statutory child protection workers across all Brisbane offices who were in their first year of practice. The researcher contacted each person individually by email to discover whether they would like to participate.

The final sample was 20 and all participants were female. The all-female sample is reflective of the wider workforce in statutory child protection agencies. Healy, Meagher and Cullin (2009), Lonne (2001) and Morris (2005) reported that the majority of frontline staff in statutory child protection were female. The Queensland Department of Child Safety also reported in their 2007-2008 annual report that 86.1 per cent of their workforce were female (Queensland Department of Child Safety, 2008). In keeping with the conventions of qualitative sampling (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Marshall, 1996), heterogeneity was sought, with variation of age and time spent in the organization across the first year. Half of the sample was aged 20-24 with two participants aged 25-29, three participants aged 35-39, three participants aged 40-44 and one participant in each of the 45-49 and 50-54 years age groups. The time spent within the statutory child protection agency at the time of the interview ranged from three weeks to 12 months. The mean time spent with the agency was seven months.

### *Data Collection*

For the data collection, the researcher used a set of procedures that captured each participant's recollection of events and gleaned information about how their subjective motivations at the time affected their particular actions. The research explored how these participants interpreted their undergraduate preparation and whether they believed it either supported or limited their move into the statutory child protection sector as a professional.

Each face-to-face semi-structured interview allowed the participant to discuss the perceived processes they had been involved in as they progressed through the early months of their practice, up to a maximum period of 12 months. The interviews were open-ended encounters and the participants were encouraged to raise issues themselves, in their own words, and according to their own construction of events. The interviews were tape recorded and subsequently transcribed.

*Analysis*

The data analysis used in this study is the method proposed by Stake (1995) and involves direct interpretation and categorical aggregation. Miles and Huberman's (1984) advice regarding the rearranging of data by placing it into a matrix of categories was used to assist with the categorical aggregation of the data. Data analysis occurred in phases with the matrix consisting of cross referencing questions and information supplied by participants in the first stage. Following this, the matrix was further developed to include the researcher's interpretation of participants' responses. The data was then catalogued into sub-issues before a third level of analysis identified emerging issues.

*Ethics*

Ethics approval was granted by Central Queensland University (ethics H06/11-180) and the Queensland Department of Child Safety requested, and was provided with, a copy of this ethics approval.

## RESULTS

As shown in Table 1, participants within this sample had completed a range of undergraduate programs. The qualifications in this sample can be classified into three main categories: human service graduates comprised 50 per cent of the participants, those with psychology or a specialization in psychology comprised 35 per cent, and those with a social work degree comprised 15 per cent.

TABLE 1. Undergraduate Degrees Completed by the Participants

Undergraduate Degree	Number	Proportion (%)
Bachelor of Human Services	2	10
Bachelor of Human Services (specialization)	2	10
Bachelor of Social Science in Human Services	3	15
Bachelor of Applied Science (specialization)	2	10
Bachelor of Social Work	3	15
Bachelor of Psychology	4	20
Bachelor of Arts (major in psychology)	2	10
Dual degrees	2	10
Total	20	100

In addition to the various course work requirements within their degree, some participants had the opportunity to complete a WIL placement within a statutory child protection agency or other organisation as part of their studies (see Table 2).

TABLE 2. Organizational WIL Experience Completed by the Participants

Agency	Number	Proportion (%)
Statutory child protection agency	6	30
Other Government Department	3	15
Not-for-profit organization	2	10
No practicum placement	9	45
Total	20	100

Of the participants in this study, 45 per cent reported not having completed any practical experience as part of their studies, 30 per cent had a previous WIL experience in statutory child protection and the remaining 25 per cent had completed a WIL placement in another area. Those who did not complete a WIL placement were studying for qualifications in Applied Science, Psychology and Arts.

#### *Undergraduate Course Work and Preparation for Statutory Child Protection Work*

Participants identified different factors that were important to their current role as a statutory child protection worker in the course work that they completed prior to obtaining a professional statutory child protection worker position, including gaining an understanding of child protection work from specific subjects and developing an awareness of general theoretical approaches. Lola, Silvia and June were able to provide specific examples of how certain subjects were important to them in their first year of professional practice as a statutory child protection worker.

There were several subjects that... helped me. One... would have been social policy and practice. It gave me a good understanding... of how the government worked. Overall... I found [my] degree quite practical. (Lola)

I did a child protection subject that was based on working in a statutory... agency. ... I think it was very relevant to the work [I] am doing now. ... It focussed on the indicators of abuse, what happens to a child in care and risk assessments. (Silvia)

The subjects I chose... were based on child protection... and youth justice. The course was run by some well-known child protection workers and influential people in the area, so I do believe those subjects have assisted me. (June)

Some workers had found that their previous coursework was directly relevant to their current work. In some cases, such as June's, it appears that a student can make a conscious and considered decision to undertake subjects that have a statutory child protection focus. In other examples, it appears that the decision to take a course that is applicable to statutory child protection work may be more serendipitous.

Other participants highlighted general information or theoretical approaches that they elicited from their degree studies, which they believed was assisting them in their work.

My studies have helped me with a lot of the background information like attachment theory and... why some people respond differently to certain situations than others. (Jessica)

We did a lot... on child development and... attachment theory. ... I felt... it gave me [a] good background knowledge on working with children. (Annabelle)

I don't know if I can... say one subject particularly. I think the whole [degree] course was very valuable. (June)

I believe my... degree has been very helpful. ... [because] you... look at a wide variety of areas which I feel are applicable to this job. (Sarah)

The ability of participants to identify the value in the broader course work that they undertook in their undergraduate degree is positive. However, some participants reported that, although their degree provided some assistance, overall they did not feel prepared in a practical sense for work in a statutory child protection organization.

I think [my degree] gave me a foundation to work from. But in terms of everyday work it didn't prepare me, but then I don't think it could. (Kylie)

In an academic sense, yes, but in an experiential... sense, no [I didn't feel well prepared]. (Raylene)

There are probably aspects of my degree that have come in handy but neither of them has really prepared me for working in this field. (Megan)

We did a little bit on the child development milestones which has been helpful but that was about it. Everything else I did in my degree was pretty much useless. (Matea)

These comments contrast to the earlier comments by Jessica, Annabelle, June and Sarah and may perhaps reflect the fact that the disciplines of individuals filling the role of a statutory child protection worker have been changing over recent years.

#### *Importance of the WIL Placement*

Of the participants who had an opportunity to complete a WIL placement, 55 per cent reported their WIL placement had assisted them in having a greater understanding of working in statutory child protection. All participants who completed a WIL placement provided examples from their placement that were helpful, which indicates the importance of providing these experiences to students who may work in the statutory child protection field after graduation. Some, like Julie, Lola, June and Raylene, felt that the WIL experience had confirmed their desire to work in statutory child protection on the completion of their studies.

As part of my degree I did a 70 day placement in child protection and that confirmed I wanted to work here. (Julie)



In the final semester it was a requirement to undertake a professional placement. That was helpful as it provided insight into what it would be like to work in child protection. I did the majority of my placement in the Initial Assessment (IA) Team<sup>2</sup> and was then transferred into the Children Under Orders team<sup>3</sup>. I believe that my placement assisted me in obtaining this job. (Lola)

I completed my final placement in child protection. I believe it gave me good insight into the role. ... When I finished my placement I was offered a [temporary position] for three weeks which has kept being extended. (June)

I completed a placement here and feel it was a foot in the door. I was already learning the job before I was employed and it also gave the people in the office where I was doing my placement a chance to see how I worked or fitted in. (Raylene)

Silvia and Annabelle felt their WIL placement in statutory child protection gave them an understanding of the role.

My placement gave me a good knowledge of working in child protection, [of] the role and what they do from the intake process to placing a child. (Silvia)

I completed a three month placement in child protection. I feel it assisted me in getting a job and having an understanding of the overall role of a child protection worker. (Annabelle)

This research identified that a WIL placement within a statutory child protection agency had a number of benefits for the student: confirmation that they wanted to work in the statutory child protection field; the opportunity to potentially obtain employment within the area; and gaining a more detailed understanding of the role. In particular, Julie's placement, which was of significant length, presumably provided her with a greater understanding of the role of a statutory child protection worker as well as the organizational and legislative framework that the workers operated within. It is, therefore, significant that the WIL placement confirmed her desire to work within statutory child protection.

While 45 per cent of participants indicated that their WIL placement did not develop their understanding of a statutory child protection context for an employee, they were able to identify other elements of their WIL placement that were beneficial. For example, Kylie was able to identify how elements of her WIL placement, even though not directly related to statutory child protection, prepared her for future employment in a statutory child protection agency.

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<sup>2</sup> The Initial Assessment Team is responsible for going out into the community and interviewing children, parents, caregivers and other relevant parties about the information received from members of the community about a child. If the information is substantiated they need to place the child in care and apply for the relevant court orders.

<sup>3</sup> The Children Under Orders Team is responsible for case managing children and young people who are on court orders or in voluntary care as well as continuing to assess the risks of the child and in some cases work towards reunification with the family.

In terms of interacting with clients and other agencies and kind of working to a framework, I think it [my placement] did. But, obviously there's, you know, everyday kind of policies and things to do with the Department that unless you've worked in the Department you wouldn't know about. (Kylie).

Although Alison, Ashley, Kylie and Sarah did not complete a WIL placement within a statutory child protection agency, they highlighted that having a supervised WIL experience still had provided them with additional skills for working with children and families. This is an important outcome of WIL as students who possess generic skills are more likely to gain employment (Freudenberg, Brimble, & Cameron, 2011).

I had to do a 13 week field placement with Foster Care Queensland as part of my course. I believe that assisted me with this work as we did a lot of work for child protection agencies. (Alison)

I completed a 13 week prac at the Department of Communities. It gave me a small insight into... case noting and... other general skills. (Ashley)

I completed my third year placement with a community agency and the second one was with the Department of Juvenile Justice. ... I learnt a lot from my placements about working with young people, aggressive clients and also liaising with other organizations. (Sarah)

However, not all WIL experiences prepare students for their first professional job. Natalie enjoyed her WIL placement but believed it had not given her insight into what working in a statutory child protection agency would be like.

I went to a non-government organization for my placement. ... I thought, 'Oh, this is great, I love this work.' ... Child protection is totally different... it was a bit of a shock. (Natalie)

As shown in Table 2, nine (45%) of the participants did not have the opportunity to complete a WIL experience as part of their undergraduate studies. Of these nine, five participants felt that it would have been beneficial while the other four did not comment on whether they thought a WIL placement would have assisted their transition into the role. Matea and Chevon would have liked their courses to offer a WIL placement in order to give them insight into how to work in the statutory child protection area.

I had no work experience or anything. It would have been helpful because when I started I felt like I didn't know anything. (Matea)

Having the opportunity to complete a field placement for five weeks of one day a week would have been a good experience but [my degree didn't] offer that. (Chevon)

These comments confirm the earlier findings that, for students working in a statutory child protection context post-graduation, a WIL placement within a statutory child protection agency is ideal or, alternatively, that a WIL placement that develops generic skills within the child and family welfare sector is valuable.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Historically, child protection organizations have employed social workers as their frontline staff but in recent years there has been a shift to employing staff with backgrounds in more generic social and behavioural science disciplines (Healy & Meagher, 2007; Lonne & Allen-Kelly, 2008), which is consistent with the participants' reports in this research. The reason for this change appears to be twofold: firstly, workforce reforms have been an outcome of public inquiries into the historical care and protection of children (Crime and Misconduct Commission, 2004; Forde, 1999); secondly, it has been a response to the challenge of recruiting and retaining suitably qualified staff (Healy & Meagher; Lonne & Allen-Kelly).

Australian statutory child protection organizations, as a result of workforce reforms, have acknowledged the importance of specialist knowledge and are starting to make considerable investments in professional development to improve direct practice (Healy & Meagher, 2007). For example, in Queensland the statutory child protection agency has established partnerships with several universities to offer graduates the opportunity to complete specialist postgraduate programs in child protection practice (Healy & Meagher). Although this is an important step towards developing a workforce with specialist knowledge, frameworks and ideologies, it does not address the concerns surrounding the different perspectives that graduates bring from disparate tertiary undergraduate studies. Certainly, the opportunity for undergraduate students to have a WIL placement experience in their final years of study at least exposes them to the organizational context and the reality of statutory responsibilities.

The participants in this research described the completion of a WIL placement as one of the most beneficial aspects of their studies. They believed that this experience had facilitated the transition into the workplace because of the additional knowledge of context, role expectations and exposure to the complexity of the work. It is clear from the data that those participants who had the opportunity to do a WIL placement indicated that they felt more prepared for work than those who did not. However, Natalie, who did have a WIL experience, still found it difficult to transfer her experience from her non-government organization into this statutory child protection context. This provides an example of how different degrees may have different learning objectives and thus place different boundaries around what the organization can expose the student to during the period of WIL placement experience. This is irrespective of what the student may bring to the workplace in terms of their individual characteristics and attributes.

WIL placements have long been a significant component of a number of professions including social work, nursing, teaching and engineering (Bates, 2005). The social work profession has a long history of WIL placements being a compulsory component of the university degree where students are required to complete two 16-week WIL experiences – one in their third year and one in their final year, usually in their final semester of study (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2009). These students are required to complete each WIL placement in a different employment context to allow them to diversify their knowledge and skills, and gain a greater understanding of different social work roles and contexts. The three social work participants in this study all commented positively on the role that the WIL placement played in confirming their desire to work for this organization.

In more recent years, WIL has emerged as a core expectation of tertiary degrees (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). This means that the more generic

social and behavioral science disciplines are now using a WIL experience as part of their degree structure. As previously explained, each degree will focus the WIL experience according to the philosophical constructs of that degree or discipline. In criminology, the student's experience of a WIL placement provides them with an opportunity to engage in problem-solving activities and test principles, techniques and values that have been taught in the classroom (Bates, 2008). The WIL placement in the criminology degree is for thirteen days spread across the final semester of study and, because of this constraint, the structure of the learning experience is limited to a workplace project rather than client contact (Bates, 2008). This supports the notion that there is no single consistent learning experience for students who have an opportunity to complete a WIL placement, which in turn has implications for any student transitioning into their first professional employment responsibility.

Participants who had the opportunity to complete their WIL placement in a statutory child protection setting reported having a greater understanding of working in such a multifaceted environment. The literature supports this finding and reports that students who are offered a child protection WIL experience as part of their studies have an increased understanding, desire and commitment to work in child protection upon graduation (Barbee et al., 2009; Department of Communities (Child Safety), 2010; Ellis, Ellett, & DeWeaver, 2007).

Previous research suggested that a WIL experience in child protection contributed to a 'professionalizing' of the child protection workforce because graduates had been provided with the knowledge of working in this field prior to managing a caseload of their own (Alperin, 1998; Barbee et al., 2009; Cimino, Cimino, Nuehring, Raybin, & Wisler-Waldock, 1982). Barbee and colleagues (2009) argued that graduates in the United States of America (USA) who were employed in a frontline child protection context immediately after the completion of the WIL placement were more confident, better prepared and more committed than other graduates. The findings of this research support these prior findings and suggest that graduates who have the opportunity to complete a WIL placement in their future employment context appear to feel more practice ready, while those who do not complete such a WIL experience may be more idealistic about the role, and be less realistic about the complexity of the work and the political nature of the organization.

Using WIL placements as a unique way of recruiting graduates is not an uncommon approach, which is well documented in the literature: it is a useful screening and recruitment tool for potential staff (Alperin, 1998; Department of Communities (Child Safety), 2010; Healy & Meagher, 2007; Robison, 2006; Rome, 1997). This method of recruitment has also been positively associated with individuals having a higher level of performance as well as assisting with improved retention rates at the frontline (Albers, Reilly, & Rittner, 1993; Dhooper, Royse, & Wolfe, 1990). This suggests that WIL placements in the final stage of study can play a valuable role in the recruitment phase. It is believed that the practical experience provided by WIL facilitates an opportunity for students to reflect on their motivations, professional ideology and their belief systems (Bates, 2004). This process can then build on their existing intrinsic motivation, connecting them with greater commitment to the role and the organization while surviving the realities of the complexity associated with child protection employment.

This study does have some limitations. The decision by individuals not to volunteer to participate in this study may bias the results. The inability of people to participate if they had already left the organization prior to the interviews being conducted may also have an effect. Another limitation is that all participants were female. Despite the majority of workers in the

statutory child protection field being female, the inclusion of male participants would have provided the sample with a greater diversity.

Further research is needed into the other factors that impact on individuals within their first year of practice in statutory child protection, apart from the role of their undergraduate coursework and WIL placements. This could include research into the factors that assist individuals to transition into a statutory child protection role and the factors that assist in the worker developing their emerging competence within the profession.

The results of this study support the value of WIL in providing opportunities for students to make concrete links between the theoretical knowledge they acquire at university and the practical realities of work. This experiential component of tertiary undergraduate courses can be a significant contribution to the student learning. Not all participants within this study were able to identify and articulate value from the course work component of their undergraduate training for their employment within the statutory child protection field. However, all participants who had undertaken a WIL component in their degree could identify benefits of their involvement in the program. Just over half stated that their WIL placement had given them a greater understanding of the statutory child protection organization and their work within it. Of the participants who did not undertake a WIL placement, individuals either mentioned how they believed that a WIL experience would have been valuable or made no comment at all on WIL.

Given that graduate child protection practitioners have identified the importance of WIL, either because they participated in a placement as part of their undergraduate degree, or they have recognized the benefits since they have started working in the statutory child protection sector, it would be beneficial for students in the broader range of disciplines recruited into the statutory child protection field to have some access to WIL experiences within statutory child protection agencies. This would require a range of disciplines in universities to develop and maintain effective links with these agencies. As there are some concerns regarding the placement of university students into statutory child protection agencies (Drury-Hudson, 1999), universities would need to carefully design and monitor these programs to ensure that they were beneficial for the student, and ideally, also the agency. It would also be appropriate to cultivate WIL placement opportunities for students in government and non-government organizations where the student would be exposed to a range of child welfare and family issues. The student, perhaps with assistance from the university, should be able to develop links between this more generic experience and work within statutory child protection agencies.

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## About the Journal

The Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education publishes peer-reviewed original research, topical issues, and best practice articles from throughout the world dealing with Cooperative Education (Co-op) and Work Integrated Learning/Education (WIL).

In this Journal, Co-op/WIL is defined as an educational approach that uses relevant work-based projects that form an integrated and assessed part of an academic program of study (e.g., work placements, internships, practicum). These programs should have clear linkages with, or add to, the knowledge and skill base of the academic program. These programs can be described by a variety of names, such as work-based learning, workplace learning, professional training, industry-based learning, engaged industry learning, career and technical education, internships, experiential education, experiential learning, vocational education and training, fieldwork education, and service learning.

The Journal's main aim is to allow specialists working in these areas to disseminate their findings and share their knowledge for the benefit of institutions, co-op/WIL practitioners, and researchers. The Journal desires to encourage quality research and explorative critical discussion that will lead to the advancement of effective practices, development of further understanding of co-op/WIL, and promote further research.

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*Research reports* should contain; an introduction that describes relevant literature and sets the context of the inquiry, a description and justification for the methodology employed, a description of the research findings-tabulated as appropriate, a discussion of the importance of the findings including their significance for practitioners, and a conclusion preferably incorporating suggestions for further research.

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