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## Pivots, pirouettes and practicalities: Actions and reactions of work-integrated learning practitioners

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## Pivots, pirouettes and practicalities: Actions and reactions of work-integrated learning practitioners

### Abstract

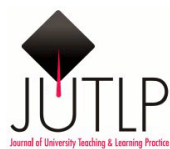
One impact of the global pandemic of 2020 was a rapid shift in the delivery of work-integrated learning (WIL) to remote activity among WIL practitioners, students and educators alike. Along with professional practice research in higher degrees, WIL practice, including placements and non-placements, responded actively and sometimes reactively to the challenges of sudden transition to online environments. What strategies - pivots and pirouettes - did WIL practitioners use to weather the storm of Covid-19? What does this tell us about the nature of WIL? This paper captures the seemingly overnight response to shifting work-based learning to online and other spaces. With change came the opportunity to reflect on the varying areas of WIL: from the practical processes of ensuring students are cared for to pivoting to the learning opportunities it presented in building digital literacies and adapting to the global future of work. This study is a Trans-Tasman collaboration of four WIL practitioners exploring their responsiveness to disruption in WIL contexts. We present collective autoethnographic responses to such themes as disruption, becoming resilient, pivoting to change, changing perceptions of WIL and the legacies of the pandemic. These themes apply to learners and educators alike, and our words embody the experiences of both groups. Our responses to phenomena highlighted this need for resilience and agility. Methodologically, the researchers' micro-narrative responses to key themes structure themselves into a macro-narrative that demonstrates the lived experiences of the researchers as educators in the WIL space and explores implications for ongoing and future practice.

### Practitioner Notes

1. What strategies - pivots and pirouettes - did WIL practitioners use to weather the storm of Covid-19?
2. What does this tell us about the nature of WIL?
3. This paper captures the seemingly overnight response to shifting work-based learning to online and other spaces.

### Keywords

WIL, work-based learning, employability, COVID-19, pandemic, higher education



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## **Pivots, pirouettes and practicalities: Actions and reactions of work-integrated learning practitioners**

### **Abstract**

One impact of the global pandemic of 2020 was a rapid shift in the delivery of work-integrated learning (WIL) to remote activity among WIL practitioners, students and educators alike. Along with professional practice research in higher degrees, WIL practice, including placements and non-placements, responded actively and sometimes reactively to the challenges of sudden transition to online environments. What strategies - pivots and pirouettes - did WIL practitioners use to weather the storm of Covid-19? What does this tell us about the nature of WIL? This paper captures the seemingly overnight response to shifting work-based learning to online and other spaces. With change came the opportunity to reflect on the varying areas of WIL: from the practical processes of ensuring students are cared for to pivoting to the learning opportunities it presented in building digital literacies and adapting to the global future of work. This study is a Trans-Tasman collaboration of four WIL practitioners exploring their responsiveness to disruption in WIL contexts. We present collective autoethnographic responses to such themes as disruption, becoming resilient, pivoting to change, changing perceptions of WIL and the legacies of the pandemic. These themes apply to learners and educators alike, and our words embody the experiences of both groups. Our responses to phenomena highlighted this need for resilience and agility. Methodologically, the researchers' micro-narrative responses to key themes structure themselves into a macro-narrative that demonstrates the lived experiences of the researchers as educators in the WIL space and explores implications for ongoing and future practice.

### **Keywords**

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## Introduction

In this paper, we explore the experiences of Australia and New Zealand practitioners in Work-Integrated Learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. On a global scale, this event has been unprecedented, and the sector was not prepared to seamlessly move away from physical presence to online teaching and working. On a smaller scale, we have seen these disruptions before during the natural catastrophes that happen all so often in New Zealand and Australia. Nevertheless, the scale and length of the interruptions required practitioners in Higher Education to rethink their practices, not just the what and where, but also the why. Where Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) has been a field of inquiry for years (Davies & Bentrovato, 2011), the “panic-gogy” as Dean and Campbell (2020) so colourfully describe the sudden shift to online teaching and remote WIL as well as the ‘online triage’ (Gacs et al., 2020), has seen many impactful and creative pivots and pirouettes to the ongoing challenges. With Zegwaard et al. (2020), we concur that this:

Opportunity to research the impact of the pandemic on the higher education sector as it is occurring provides valuable insight to the impact of a global disruptive event to further our understanding, and for historical posterity (p. 319).

While the changes to university teaching were widespread, our research focuses on the impact on work-integrated learning (WIL) and work-based learning (WBL). In the field of WIL, the impact of the pandemic and the resulting shifts in practices have certainly been felt by teachers, administrators, practitioners, scholars, and students. It has opened opportunities to discuss where and how we and our students work; how work-based learning can be integrated into online spaces and curricula; what skills are required and what outcomes these new forms of learning have on students’ employability and career learning.

Our paper takes the form of collective autoethnographic responses on our experience of the pandemic and the changes to WIL/WBL during 2020. It explores how WIL practitioners in Australia and New Zealand have experienced and responded to the pandemic in their areas of WIL-related work and what opportunities this has opened for the future of WIL.

This paper explores cross-cultural aspects in various forms. First, we are four scholars working at three different institutions (University of Adelaide, University of Technology Sydney, Otago Polytechnic) across two countries (Australia and New Zealand). Further, we have different cultural and linguistic backgrounds identifying with various subcultures and intersections. Third, we all work with learners from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds, some of us in our national urban and regional contexts, others in Vietnam and Indonesia or with learners that are involved in international placements and projects in the Asia-Pacific region, Europe, and the Americas. These insights are reflected in our narratives and the personal experiences that we bring into this article.

This paper’s contribution is to add to the community of practice of WIL/WBL through sharing experiences and raising awareness of the plurality of insights and impacts as well as the opportunities that might arise. After a short overview of the pandemic impact in Australia and New Zealand and the exploration of its effects in the WIL area, we will present findings from our autoethnographic narrative explorations that derive from the yarning of the four authors on the topics of becoming resilient, pivoting to change, legacies of WIL and dealing with disruption. In the end, we will present a summary on the future of WIL in a post-pandemic society.

## **Context**

When COVID-19 first became widely known in January 2020, it was before the start of the academic teaching year in Australia and New Zealand and its impacts were not yet apparent. However, a few weeks into Semester 1 in March, seemingly overnight, universities had to change their in-person teaching and learning to Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning (Hodges et al., 2020).

Australian universities reacted to the pandemic in various ways due to border closures and the restrictions that physical distancing imposed on teaching practices. The former had a big impact on international and domestic students getting or returning to Australia with massive implications on enrolments, revenue, and employment security of Higher Education staff (Kenny et al., 2021; Marshman & Larkins, 2020). The latter posed many questions about what we teach, how we teach and why we teach, requiring subjects to be cancelled, paused, changed in their delivery to online and hybrid modes and teaching staff to rapidly pivot to these changes. Various universities approached this in different ways and to different degrees (Crawford et al., 2020a). Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) was experienced across the sector and poses many challenges for future integration and preparedness (Crawford et al., 2020b). For curriculum-based work-integrated learning, this meant similar approaches. Some programs were paused or cancelled altogether (e.g. international placements), others saw significant changes to requirements (e.g. assessment) and a new flexibility (e.g. kinds of placements, hours, modes of working/studying). Where semester 1 still saw many subjects on online mode, WIL activities resumed and soon on campus classes will follow.

In New Zealand, an initial flight ban from China (except returning New Zealanders who must self-isolate) came into place on the 3rd of February. Within 3 weeks, the Prime Minister announced that the entire country would move to a maximum lockdown with many tertiary students returning home in this window. During this period all teaching moved online. After the initial four weeks, a gradual relaxation of lockdown allowed for a return to some classroom teaching. Tertiary classroom teaching was allowed only for specialist subjects (e.g. requiring mechanical workshops) and still required separation with a maximum of 10 people in a space. Some tertiary organisations returned to normal teaching, although others stayed online for the whole semester (finishing mid-June). Level 1 on the 8th of June meant essentially a return to normal with a few local lockdowns due to emerging COVID-cases.

Mackey et al. (2012) described the experiences of tertiary educators in a College of Education (University Canterbury, New Zealand) after the 2010/11 earthquakes in Christchurch. After initial checks of technology infrastructure, teaching was moved almost entirely online or at least into a blended structure in the first week of the semester. Mackey and colleagues argue that a history of blended delivery meant the College “was well equipped through its existing infrastructure, pedagogy, and capability to support new blends of teaching and learning”. But they warn, “there is a very real difference between planned design for blended delivery and the rapid adaptations and innovations required to meet changing circumstances in disaster conditions” (n.p.). Mackey et al. (2012) described how crisis induced innovations “often lead to structural and systemic changes as new ways of working and interacting are adopted, further enhancing the resilience of individuals and organizations to cope with new disruptions”. In particular, “technology is becoming a critical enabler to enable people to work, socialize, and communicate and, in this case, to continue to teach and learn”.

## **Literature review**

### ***The impact of COVID-19***

In the university setting, work-integrated learning (WIL) is used to describe all kinds of practice-based learning integrated into the curriculum (Wood et al., 2020). Work-based learning (WBL) in a narrow sense, is used to refer to learning that takes place in the professional setting (Boud et al., 2001; Cooper et al., 2010). It can refer to a broad range of learning experiences including; clinical placements, internships, work experience (Billett, 1995) and is integral part of many practice-based degrees such as Engineering, Health, Education, Psychology. In the Australian and New Zealand context, WBL is increasingly becoming more common outside of these traditional profession areas extending into other areas such as Business, Communication, Design, Architecture and Law (Stanley & Xu, 2018). A Universities Australia report of student participation in work-integrated learning found that one in three university students in 2017 had undertaken WIL (Universities Australia, 2019).

The impact of the pandemic restricted the access to professional environments so students had less to no opportunities to experience work placements and at the same time lower university incomes and budgets meant restrictions in support which had further implications on equity and accessibility within these programs. The WBL types mostly affected by the pandemic were compulsory placements where students are fully immersed in a workplace setting (Zegwaard et al., 2020).

### ***Online and virtual WIL***

However, the field was not completely unprepared for the pandemic. Due to the massification of higher education and the opening of universities to labour market (Thompson & Cook, 2019), universities have needed to pivot to these events in order to find ways to scale, broaden and make more accessible opportunities for students to participate in work-based learning (Jackson & Meek, 2020). While the delivery of non-placement activities and preparation/debriefing workshops have been moved to blended and online learning for some time (Dean et al., 2020; Larkin & Beatson, 2014), the actual experience of work places can only be achieved in an online or simulated space to some degree and for some professional fields. Where a marketing or design student might still be able to complete internships in a working-from-home mode, like many professionals do now (Kramer & Kramer, 2020) or a geography student could do a virtual field trip (Atchison & Kennedy, 2020); a primary education or nursing student might not be able to fully achieve this in times of school closures or hospital running in emergency modes. The result was a myriad of various approaches depending on institutions, approaches and individual educators.

Virtual work-based learning for engineering (Arastoopour et al., 2016) and accounting students (Bayerlein, 2015), to name just two disciplines, are effective ways of integrating practice-based learning and authentic assessment into the curriculum, already from the first year of their studies. “Online internships have become the central modality of work-based learning for students around the world” (Hora et al. 2020, p. 2) though Hora and colleagues stress that technology-assisted learning has already started in the 1980 and has undergone rapid and significant developments.

For students studying languages, international/global degrees or subjects with an international outlook, online international internships (Marr, 2019), virtual exchanges (VE) (Jager et al., 2021; Stevens Initiative, 2020) or collaborative online international learning (COIL) (Guth & Rubin, 2015; Hyett et al., 2019) initiatives present an opportunity to still achieve international and intercultural learning for professional purposes and immersion into new cultural environments. They are not new occurrences, but have certainly gained momentum through the pandemic.

### **The impact on WIL/WBL educators**

Just like work places and institutions had to pivot to change and become more flexible, educators and students had to go through similar processes and develop their transferable skills - so often quoted for 21st century workplaces - such as adaptability, flexibility, resilience and digital literacies.

Collie and Martin (2016) argue “a defining feature of teaching work is that it involves novelty, change, and uncertainty on a daily basis. Being able to respond effectively to this change is known as adaptability” (p. 27). It exists in different domains, such as cognitive, emotional and behavioural. However, not every educator and higher education professional can automatically adapt to disruptions (Shelley et al., 2013) and this poses additional challenges on the ever-growing multitasking skills of educators. In that sense, educators become creators of media resources, workflow managers, and online tutors all at once (Mueller & Oguro, in press).

The ways WIL practitioners in New Zealand and Australia across three institutions adjusted their work-based and work-integrated practices; how they became more resilient throughout the ongoing impact of the pandemic and how they imagine the looming impact on WIL will be explored in the next section, following an introduction to the admittedly unconventional methodology we used to produce insightful, personal and reflective data.

Wang and Gordon (1994) saw academic resilience as an increased likelihood of academic success despite environmental adversities. These adversities are usually seen as acute events that affect learning. Martin (2013) moves this from crisis to everyday by considering academic buoyancy - the capacity to overcome setbacks, challenges, and difficulties that are part of everyday academic life. This buoyancy in turn can be related to concepts of academic thriving (Schreiner, 2010), which as James and Walters (2020) demonstrated, can be taught.

### **Method**

The umbrella method of this study is ensemble or collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al., 2013). This methodology engages two or more autoethnographers in a research community to share lived experiences on pre-identified sociocultural phenomena and “collaboratively analyze and interpret them for commonalities and differences” (Hernandez et al., 2017, p. 251). Combining perceptions and stories provided a richer, more multi-faceted understanding of such phenomena as those lived collectively yet eclectically in different locales during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, this way of doing research transcends geographic boundaries and embraces the affordances of mediation via technology. Multivocality ensures rigour as well as a triangulatory sense of data crystallisation while, epistemologically appropriately, disrupting hegemonic theorising. In the words of St. Pierre and Richardson (2005):

Nurturing our own voices releases the censorious hold of “science writing” on our consciousness as well as the arrogance it fosters in our psyche; writing is validated as a method of knowing (p. 962).

The methodology enacts Ellis’s (2004) notion of writing as a site of discovery, but extends the autoethnographic gaze beyond individuals to communities. Ellis (2004) methodologically legitimated personal location as a site of cultural criticism, while the work of St. Pierre and Richardson (2005) and more recently Chang and her colleagues collectivises and democratises the



affordances of self-narrative to create combined stories articulating themes inherent in the lived experiences of the community. Stringer (1997) advocated that community-based ethnography is “both academically rigorous and socially responsive” (p. 17). Community autoethnography captures the key affordance or ‘merit’ of being participatory: “Its products are not outsider accounts, portrayals, or reports, but collaborative accounts written from the emic—or insider—perspective of the group” (p. 17). It also harnesses the power of narrative methods. In 1998, Hecht explained the study of narrative provided an “alternative, scholarly mode of expression for the theories and concepts. [N]arratives are . . . a way of knowing, understanding, studying, and expressing” (p. 17). It ensures, St. Pierre and Richardson (2005) argued, writing that adapts “to the kind of political/social world we inhabit—a world of uncertainty” (p. 962), such as our COVID-inflected world of today, affording “a communal sense of real experience” (St. Pierre & Richardson, 2005, p. 964).

The collaboration involved four educators in work-integrated learning positions: two in Australia (one dealing with international placements) and two in New Zealand (one with honorary professorships in Australia, Indonesia and Vietnam), so one academic on each side of the Tasman was specifically involved in international engagement, as well as local. Collaborative autoethnography involves the sharing of stories and is aligned to community autoethnography, being “a relationship-making activity among researchers who participate in and co-construct each other’s existence” (Toyashi et al., 2009, p. 59). The methodology is, hence, a praxis-oriented form of nomadic enquiry.

### ***The collaborative autoethnographies***

Melissa Connor works on the land of the Kaurna people of the Adelaide plains. During COVID-19 she transitioned WIL learning courses online, including supervision of internship students in Australia, China, Italy, Greece etc. Melissa has a strong interest in the employability of students and graduate outcomes.

Beate Mueller works on the land of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation which is now the centre of Sydney. As an international educator, she supports students in developing intercultural and employability skills during in-country and virtual international programs in the Americas, Europe, and the Asia-Pacific region.

Sam Mann Professor Samuel Mann teaches for Capable NZ - Otago Polytechnic’s school specialising in professional practice and work-based learning. Sam was responsible for the development of Education for Sustainability at Otago Polytechnic where they are committed to every graduate thinking and acting as a sustainable practitioner. His recent work focuses on the development of a Transformation Mindset.

Martin Andrew is a transnational educationalist with a strong interest in mentorship, collaboration, identity and creativity. During the COVID age, he has Zoomed to learners in New Zealand, Australia, Indonesia and Vietnam, where he is a well-known teaching personality and honorary professor. He currently has 25 plus doctoral or masters learners in New Zealand and Australia.

### ***Procedure***

The tenets of this special edition were collaboration and inter- or transnationality. The methodology employed enacts Trans-Tasman experience and brings in voices from the wider world in which

practitioners engage. The researchers engaged in extended online discussions through which five key themes emerged. Each researcher wrote of their lived experiences, alluding to those of others in their spheres, on each theme. Next, the authors interacted with each other's narratives to create a responsive and dialogic chain of narratives. Four voices, then, appear in each themed story. Each researcher then devised a single story incorporating the four voices according to their own epistemologies and ways of dealing with either data or narrative. The findings, then, reflect a gamut of methods of representation, signalling that individuals' ways of being make up the discourse of the online community (Andrew, 2014).

## **Findings**

### ***Disruption***

'Disruption' pertained/pertains to the COVID-19 crisis in many ways. Primarily, WIL in trades, health sciences, teacher education, everything, lost physical access to its contexts; internships went remote when feasible. If under Education 4.0, the curriculum is the real world plus technologically-mediated versions of it as in Second Life, the ecosystem of WBL has been disrupted, in various ways and for different periods of time in the nations where we all operate; even countries such as New Zealand and Australia, where lockdowns were sharp and short, were forced to innovate, adapt, upskill and employ imagination. Melissa suggested this was from a position of under-preparedness: "the available workplace tools such as Zoom, Skype, Trello, Slack, etc, were not widely used in the university pre-Covid and not widely shown or included in teaching." Martin added, "the ideas that the WWW and the real world were the curricula and that the learner's job was to explore, critically reflect, refine and innovate, evaluate and improve were put to a sudden and quite rude test". However, many stories of adaptation are peppered through this special edition.

Australia's initial impulse was to cancel international internships: "It felt like someone had not just felled some trees, but the entire forest of opportunities was gone... complete deforestation, Kahlschlag [German]... but disruption became normal, or we normalised it" (Beate). The act of 'greening' came from the skilled determination of educators, but the impacts to those in the international sector were painful as imaginable digital solutions required access to bureaucracy that had shut down. The trauma of staff and learners, away from family, their plans and internships clouded, requires full analysis in a future study.

For those involved in postgraduate, project-centred WBL, the workplaces closed but the projects pivoted. Sam's experience demonstrated "how to overcome those disruptions in work practice is a good way of learning about the deeper aspects of the purpose, ethos and ethics of the profession".

COVID-19 also escalated and expedited the disruptive technologies underway internationally due to the burgeoning influence of Education 4.0. Although many disruptive technologies, namely composite architectures, algorithmic trust, beyond silicon, and formative artificial intelligence stalled, the fifth item on the 2020 Gartner Hype Cycle, 'digital me', became a hook for pedagogical success in WIL. Technologies that valued the identity and becoming of the individual in terms of membership to imagined discourse and professional communities found a place; and alongside the 'digital me' came a rediscovery of the importance of community. The avatar, the façade of the self, was re-consigned to gaming while academics took to Zoom in sweatpants and ghosting by cats. Learning in digital communities, which had peaked when universities embraced open learning as a matter of expediency and cost-saving in the 2000s, proved vital as learners sought spaces out of loneliness to reach out to like-feeling, like-thinking others. Disruption, then, brought the unwitting

and welcome side effect of return to the value of learning in communities of practice, passion, enquiry, interest and authenticity. In this sub-narrative, out of disruption came unity and positive change.

Looking more critically, we see other stories. The moment also foregrounded inequity, whether it be in rural Peru, Indonesia or Vietnam where problems of access and infrastructure excluded many from any change (Chauvin & Faiola, 2020), or in New Zealand's schools (I. Holsted, quoted in Strongman, 2020). Inequity predates COVID-19 and Zoom-mediated pedagogies. MIT's Kentaro Koyama (2015, online) wrote: "Technology doesn't fix broken institutions, whether they're corporate, educational, or something else. You could argue that technology amplifies existing inequalities." Martin reports a colleague from Indonesia identifying the key problem thus: "finding affordable technology for both students and lecturers is challenging". The fact that technologies are available does not mean they are affordable.

Another area of failed adaptation to disruption lay in the conference sector. Lamenting the one-way traffic of blended and online conferences, Sam concludes: "while other options for the research community have emerged (this paper for example), the rich interactions of the conference have not emerged". If capitalism were critical, and we are not sure it is, there may be room for capitalist responses to disruption: A general catch call, especially in the States, was that online experiences of conferences or of learning just weren't worth the money; they were a simulacrum of conferences/learning and not the thing itself; a shadow and not a form. Conference contributors and learners were willing to adapt for the interim, hoping that this was a temporary historical moment. Sam says: "While we congratulate ourselves on finding ways of delivering education in a pandemic, are we kidding ourselves?"

As we write in mid-2021, more reflective and more critical, we realise the old normal has become the new normal. We return to a smaller-scale world of embodied education that has learned insufficient lessons of human-kindness and reflexivity. We return to the world of 'reforms', top-down decisions implemented with the facade of consultation with those closest to what knowledge looks like in the sector and even closer in the wake of COVID-19.

This suggests COVID-19 is not the worst thing that could happen: there is more severe disruption and there will always be. 'Education for an unknown future', Barnett's coinage (2004), has been present for three decades, and 'super-complexity' for some two, as his 2017 study reflects. 'Authentic being' is achieved through "encountering strangeness ... wrestling with it and ... forming one's own responses to it" (Barrett, 2004, p. 257). Following COVID-19, the wise educator may prepare for moments of perma-crisis and perma-change, and may draw on their COVID age experience of adaptation. The real problem lies in academic capitalism: the positioning of learners as consumers; the neoliberalist construct of the student, and the need to recommodify the 'product' of education. History is in the making; Joe Biden has decried neoliberalism; HE learner numbers have increased one year on from the onset of COVID-19 in New Zealand. There may be cause for optimism. There is a fresh desire to learn out there.

### ***Pivoting to change***

In our narratives four dimensions of pivots to COVID-19-induced change in different (international) WIL domains were mentioned: the WHY, HOW, WHERE and WHEN.

The Why-dimension is the unsettling underlying question of why we practice WIL and why we recently changed our WIL practices. The latter can be answered in a straight-forward way: “The contemporary workplace favours the adaptable, resilient person” (Melissa). The former is a more complex question that opens a dichotomy between cancel and/or change (“pivots, pirouettes, or resets” - Sam). “Instead of describing the what [...] or the how, we had to think about the why - meeting the purpose our profession exists, without many of the tools and procedures we were used to” (Sam). This led many professions, including scholars, to focus on and reinvent their purpose. Getting a new lens on our work, being labelled “non-essential” or having a WIL project that suddenly does not have a community impact anymore, makes you rethink the premise of your work. Learners reflected on it: “that thing I did was only one way of achieving our purpose, now we’ve reinvented ourselves completely differently with a laser focus on why”. Sam concludes: “For others, the essential nature of their work highlighted the criticality of the mundane, the importance and interestingness of the everyday”.

The post-structuralist nature of WIL impressively illustrated how fluid and complex this social construct of our current education system is. This created not only the necessity, but also the opportunity to rethink the purpose of WIL and to co-construct and re-imagine it in real time alongside with students. Rather than focusing on outcomes, “interrogating the self via reflective positioning” offers learners more opportunities to find themselves in these new spaces that “might lead to different and fresh outcomes” (Martin). In practical terms, this repositioning of WIL practices might also lead to a pivot of how and what we assess: portfolios, critical reflections and learning narratives that “include learning about the capacity of the self to pivot - to act decisively and authentically in the face of necessity” (Martin).

The way we pivoted or the how-dimension deals more with the practicalities of our WIL practices, the balancing act between necessity and opportunity. For Sam, COVID-19 presented “the mother of all learning moments” with physical placements being the key challenge for WIL activities. Many of us practitioners wondered “how do you generate benefits to all participants (learners and communities) when the travel isn’t happening” (Sam.) WIL as a practice is in itself “adaptable, flexible and with a focus on contemporary practices, can move and shape” (Martin) and therefore pivot. So, “changes in how we viewed our definitions of an internship, our expectations and also how we prepared our students” (Melissa) had to be made.

One way of changing the nature of internships were virtual internships conducted internationally or in remote areas. “The pandemic finally opened this door and we learnt to adapt, pivot, “make it work” and eventually to embrace the opportunity” (Beate). Colleagues in Indonesia “reported the speedy need to upskill in the use of learning management systems and mobile technologies for education”. For Melissa, filming short, instructional videos, providing more drop-in sessions, individual feedback on drafts to reassure students in times of isolation were necessary changes that also created new opportunities for more personal engagement with learners and “the creation of new communities of practice” (Martin).

Not everyone, however, embraced these opportunities, academics taking voluntary separations in Australia and New Zealand often felt their values did not correspond with the organisation’s values and their ways of pivoting. “The lack of resilience in university policies during COVID-19 crystallised academic unhappiness in the sector” (Sam) and left many academics not being able to or unsupported in pivoting the way they saw fit.

The third dimension that crystallised from our narratives is the where or ‘space-dimension’ of new ways of working and doing WIL. The challenges of the physical distancing, lockdowns and working from home showed strong tendencies of pivots, hybridisation, and the exploration of new spaces of work - virtually and physically. We quickly moved into our new meeting rooms in Zoom re-decorating them frequently with digital backgrounds. Our actual offices in our less imaginative kitchens became hybrid living, teaching and work places where we suddenly found ourselves adjusting to the loss of privacy and re-defining work - life balance.

For our students, virtual and remote internships were options many embraced readily, although program providers and employers often had to create them on the go while they were themselves figuring out their new ways of working. Students doing virtual internships with companies in the US, UK or Indonesia often found themselves in the living spaces of their supervisors and colleagues who were in complete lockdown, insights they would not have gotten otherwise, bringing their community of practice closer together. “I remember hearing the chickens in my colleague’s backyard in Indonesia during our meetings” (Beate). Other students, who were unable to return to New Zealand or Australia had to negotiate private, work and study spaces. “Vietnamese learners reported how the loss of the space of study/work - an office or library away from home - forced them, with limited success, to write in the often cramped and noisy spaces of their own homes, now occupied by locked down and distracting family members. The loss of the room of one’s own is a difficult conundrum to pivot, since space to write is fundamental” (Martin).

The loss of room in times of lockdowns could often not be resolved and resulted in a pivot of time management – the when-dimension. If the space could not be changed, the time of work and learning had to shift, become more fluid, overlapping or simply postponed. When virtual WIL options break through spatial barriers, time also needs to pivot. Students doing internships in Europe or the US suddenly had to shift their lives into night-mode, conducting meetings while it was dark and the rest of their households asleep. Adjustment to time differences suddenly became a real thing without having left the country and jet lag became a “Zoom lag”.

Other students stuck inside their houses with their families in Vietnam or Indonesia needed to shift certain tasks to quiet hours early or late in the day or to relieve the heavily strained internet connections. “I found that writing at dusk was a revelation - my mind functioned in fresh and creative ways that I had been unaware of” (student of Martin). Other processes like ethics applications had to be repeated or adjusted and took extra-long time with supervisors being physically absent or hard to reach. So, our expectations, timelines and processes had to pivot as well.

### **Resilience**

During 2020, the response to COVID-19 required resilience. Resilience is a concept that has many facets: student, staff, partners and institutional resilience. When COVID-19 began to impact at the start of the 2020 Australian and New Zealand academic year, it brought opportunities to pivot, pirouette or pause. Our reflections as WIL/WBL practitioners and researchers elicited five themes: 1. Resilience as neoliberalist agenda; 2. The need to be resilient at all; 3. How do we learn and teach resilience going forward; 4. Resilience as offering new opportunities; and 5. Resilience as reflective of the experience of WIL/WBL.

Resilience as a buzzword and part of the neoliberalist agenda was explored in our reflections, as Martin wrote “‘Resilience’ has become a neoliberal buzzword in education, and employees needing to be ‘resilient’ as a code for ready to take redundancy or firing as much as a catch-call for

adaptation". "Adapt or die" (Martin) was the message being heard by the university sector. Melissa responded by reflecting on her own experience of rapidly transitioning her work-integrated learning courses to online, "I had less than 24 hours to turn in-person teaching to remote teaching. Our universities had to develop "institutional WIL resilience" to ensure that clinical placements, professional accreditation requirements and internships could continue (Zegwaard, Pretti, Rowe, 2020, p.138). As Martin wrote "The resilience of WIL lies in part in the essential nature of many of its practical and practice-based and led endeavours". It was imperative that, as Melissa wrote "the show goes on", WIL/WBL is core business to universities.

Australia and New Zealand had a different experience of COVID-19, when compared to other countries. As researchers we grappled with our experience of "covid-lite" (Melissa) and if we really had developed resilience. As Beate reflected "When I look at the world in early 2021, I am not sure if I can make claims about resilience, because I am in one of the lucky countries/cities that has hardly been affected by the virus". Melissa agreed with Beate and suggested that Australia "became a good test-case for rapidly adjusting to remote and online teaching and to experimenting with new ways of work-integrated learning".

This then prompted reflection on how those who work in WIL/WBL learn and teach resilience. The pandemic saw us engage in different ways with our students and colleagues. With the impacts of the pandemic likely to be with us for longer, how do we incorporate the teaching of resilience to our WIL/WBL students, and also for ourselves? As Sam writes "We do need to actively take responsibility for teaching the skills of buoyancy and thriving". Beate reflected that, for staff, it could be incorporated into professional practice to ensure that staff recognise and have processes for managing "emotional overload". Melissa, reflecting on the increased meetings and discussions she was having with WIL students as they undertook their remote and virtual internships noticed "students were becoming more open with discussing their lives with me". As students were adapting to change, as well as the very real impacts of losing jobs, being separated from family and friends, Melissa reflected on the role that the WIL/WBL staff member plays in supporting students:

I saw students more than I had pre-COVID. Perhaps it was a desire for human connection, or a means to be reassured that all was okay. We talked about the situation in their home country, what the weather was like, the newest Netflix show to binge, the impact of their house becoming the site of study, work and leisure and how different the professional workplace would be.

Resilience is not only the ability to handle change, it also incorporates how people are able to adapt, "incorporate difference in abilities" (Martin) and innovate. Sam reflected on resilience being an opportunity for "regeneration and thriving futures", and how in Ecology, resilience refers to nature's ability to "bounce back". How WIL/WBL 'bounces back' from the lessons of the pandemic will depend on the ability for universities to be resilient to change and adapt to new ways of doing WIL/WBL. Our experiences of the impact of COVID-19 on WIL/WBL during 2020, was of opportunities to adapt, to learn and demonstrate resilience through being open to saying yes to new ways of doing things to "make it work" (Beate). Our WIL/WBL programs transitioned to online learning and teaching, virtual experiences and the use of Zoom to show that we could adapt to the "affordances of technology" (Martin) to continue to connect with our students and industry partners.

Resilience allowed us as WIL/WBL practitioners and researchers to "reflect on the mess" (Sam) of WIL/WBL. The future of WIL/WBL will need to change to incorporate lessons from the pandemic. As Sam reflects, "Success in these terms cannot be defined as blinkered pushing to the end. We need

educational performance indicators that are better designed to reflect the messiness of people's lives and work". The impact of COVID-19 on WIL/WBL has highlighted a need for "learning how to bend in the wind and be more flexible and incorporate messiness into our lives" (Melissa).

## Discussion

As we write, the word 'pivot' is referenced at the 2021 Oscars in relation to cinema's move online; it is this concept that indicates the most lasting legacy of the pandemic. Melissa wrote: "We have seen that WIL can be made flexible, with students and host organisations showing that they can quickly adapt to change", exemplifying the claim by referencing the global corporations made freshly accessible to WIL business learners in Adelaide. Melissa extends the idea, noting students in remote and rural areas accessing WIL via urban hubs. Internships have become boundless. Martin references a language teacher who took an online practicum at an Indonesian University, accessing lived information about living and becoming that role in a different culture, meaning cross-cultural learning was an added benefit of the need to pivot. Beate shares a similar story of a learner with an internship in Indonesia, viewing from another culture the impact of globalisation. This pivot, our stories propose, open up learners' worldviews and perspectives. Sam concurs that "for WIL to truly be integrated with workplace settings, it needs to remain reflective of what is happening in the world". He asserts that we could see resetting, rethinking or regenerating as the new normal and reflect and figure out how this gives an opportunity for work-based learners to lead this regeneration.

The second most recurrent word was 'unprecedented', which speaks to the unexpectedness and unpreparedness of teaching and learning contexts and, moreover, outmoded administration-led universities. Sam's research with nursing colleagues (Ross et al., 2020) revealed that the Commission of Inquiry into the 1919 pandemic led to frameworks of nursing practice that still exist today. His daily radio interviews with (extra)ordinary individuals reflecting on the COVID-19 moment suggests that the 'fingerprint' seen in nursing from 1919 is manifest in reflective responses to disruption in 2020/21. Although the move to online learning has produced numerous success stories of adaptation and innovation, deeper value-led priorities appear: the importance of human-kindness; the resetting of business priorities, and the necessary end of fallacious neoliberal ideology. Martin notes the re-emergence of learners' – and humanity's – need for community, in the communality of online pedagogy and research studies such as this one. The deep human need for togetherness points to the erosion of the myth of the individual at the heat of neoliberal thought. The Australian experience is quite different. Among colleagues, we witness fear their university's eagerness to return to campus-based learning does not preclude learning from these collaborative pedagogies and the humanity that powers them and laments that a return to the pre-COVID-19 status quo indicates that university leaders are so intermingled with neoliberalism that they are trapped by their limitations. While some organisations have seen that flexible work arrangements lead to content workers, the business elites' retailer obsession with 'foot traffic' militates against extended work and customer flexibility. As Sam prophesies, "the next disruption can only be unprecedented if we fail to learn from this one - and that is the opportunity for WIL/WBL".

Our reflections on our adaptation to the world running differently points to enhancement of sustainability in the sector via offering programs online. Gone is the fuel-guzzling fly-in/fly-out model of placement abroad, and so far the evidence suggests online international placements still afford learning of cross-culturality. Up in the air, though, is employers' preference for employees with overseas experience. Melissa extends the idea to online experiences of study tours. Can we convince employers that virtual WIL is as valuable? Further research is needed. Martin looks forward to studies of the "impacts of immersiveness in online and imagined practicums as opposed

to the ‘actual’ practicum” and proposes that expresses a hunch that future research may reveal not just the affordances of sustainability, but also an enhanced capacity for reflectivity and imaginativeness among WIL learners.

Martin, reflecting on what has passed, realises three key themes for WIL education – participation, collaboration, and community. The affordances of technology enabled collaboration, as learners worked together reflectively in online communities of practice both within forums and within zoom breakout rooms and other social media. The sharing of resources enacted Education 4.0’s tenet that education in the future will enable learners to access the WWW and the real world as the curriculum. He recalls:

participation in the discourse of the community of practice is viably possible, and perhaps because people were home-bound, participation in online discussion boards and forums mediated by social media appear to have increased in educational contexts. People need to belong, and participation is an expression of belonging.

All four researchers concurred that during the COVID-19 period, learners accessed communities of practice online to leverage their own learning journeys. If anything, communicative interactiveness was enhanced during this period, and learners were able to practice criticality in response to others and to work on their own capacities as reflective practitioners, capacities recognised as necessary for the work-ready in the 2020s onwards. As Sam indicates, messy learning on the edge of chaos pushes individuals to explore their potential. Thinking on one’s feet, forced responsiveness to complexity, is, after all, the most essential attribute of the modern worker or leader.

## **Conclusions**

The narratives within this study exemplify how the professional practice area characterised by WIL and WBL has proven its ability to be flexible to changing events and reveals ways that practitioners adjusted to events through acts of pedagogic, methodological, social and technological pivoting. The deep need to be part of a learning community runs its way through each narrative like the weft of the weave, and that practitioners have the resilience and creativity to respond to crisis is a key thread. This paper, then, provides lessons for WIL/WBL practitioners in how to pivot not merely to online media but in a world increasingly characterised by super-complexity and an educational environment hastening towards the Education 4.0 model. This model is compatible with a post-COVID world of professional practice, and the COVID-19 period gave instructors a sense of what their educationalist and researcher future holds.

This Trans-Tasman study of the experiential learning of four eclectic practitioners provides potential lessons for the next lockdown/pandemic/need to pivot. There is, however, a sense of fear that beyond the stories of momentary pedagogical and innovative critical moments chronicled in the literature of the COVID period the institutions that run such programs as WIL/WBL will be blind to the kinds of collective learnings inscribed in the narratives. A deep fear is the inevitable return to ‘the old normal’ represented by the neoliberal ideology which has run its course and characterised by commodification and audit culture, potentially wiping away practitioners’ reflective, experiential and often transformational learning. Are educational organisations kind only in the face of crisis? COVID-19 is not the worst that could happen here - learning nothing from it is.



The multi-vocal stories also show that consideration must be given to supporting the resilience of stakeholders (students/staff/hosts/supervisors) and mechanisms and strategies for affording support should be incorporated into staff professional development and student and host preparation before WIL/WBL. While the technological support afforded learners and educators was strong, there is a sense that managerialist constraints imposed limitations on learning and learners, preventing the full renaissance of pedagogical creativity that the critics might have occasioned.

The multi-vocal methods used in this study suggest ways that practitioners with points of connection and concurrence can collaborate using the affordances of the kinds of technology that found a place in the crisis: community or collaborative autoethnography and enquiry not only makes multi-site research plausible; such methods also indicate ways that research data can accommodate not the voices to soloists, but ensembles, and even choirs.

### ***Limitations***

While this study only captures the experience of four WIL/WBL practitioners and researchers, its collectivist autoethnographic methodology enables the remembered, reflected and refracted experiences of colleagues, learners and stakeholders to be embodied within their stories. This approach also enables a more critical, multi-perspective view of the four main themes: disruption, pivoting to change, resilience and the legacies of the COVID-19 crisis for Trans-Tasman, and arguably, international practitioners within the broad range of professional practice programs.

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