Development of a cross-faculty model for the enhancement of academic standards in assessment of work-integrated learning programs

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Abstract
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At the University of Wollongong (UOW) a number of academic programs incorporate a WiL component, but the methods of presentation and assessment vary considerably. From more traditional internship programs to innovative new problem-based learning models, the breadth and variety of WiL programs at UOW presents a challenge in establishing and maintaining quality. This paper presents the response to these trends and challenges through the development of a cross-faculty model for the assessment of WiL, which can be used by academics as a reference for future program design and review. Through a review of the literature, and audit of work-integrated learning programs at UOW and consultation with UOW academics, a model representative of the main stakeholders has been developed and will help to ensure academic standards are attained in all UOW work-integrated learning programs.

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Development of a cross-faculty model for the enhancement of academic standards in assessment of work-integrated learning programs

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Abstract

The competitiveness of the graduate employment market has prompted universities to develop ways to enhance student employability. This has lead to an increase in the adoption of work-integrated learning (WiL) programs across the university sector. As these programs become a more common element in university degrees, it is necessary for the academic standards of its related assessment to be examined.

At the University of Wollongong (UOW) a number of academic programs incorporate a WiL component, but the methods of presentation and assessment vary considerably. From more traditional internship programs to innovative new problem-based learning models, the breadth and variety of WiL programs at UOW presents a challenge in establishing and maintaining quality. This paper presents the response to these trends and challenges through the development of a cross-faculty model for the assessment of WiL, which can be used by academics as a reference for future program design and review. Through a review of the literature, an audit of work-integrated learning programs at UOW and consultation with UOW academics, a model representative of the main stakeholders has been developed and will help to ensure academic standards are attained in all UOW work-integrated learning programs.

Keywords

work-integrated learning, assessment, academic standards

Introduction

In a highly competitive graduate employment environment combined with increasing competition for prospective students, universities are continually seeking ways to enhance their students’ chances of gaining employment and meeting employer expectations upon graduation. In a significant number of Australian institutions this has lead to an increase in the adoption and diversity of work-integrated learning (WiL) programs, which provide students with exposure to the workplace and an ability to gain practical experience in their chosen discipline. However, as WiL becomes a more common element in the academic environment, questions are being raised about how the academic standards of such programs can be assured and assessed (Yorke & Knight, 2004).

Recent research (Orrell, 2004) has indicated that in order for WiL to be effective it is necessary that the educational quality and management be considered as a platform for the development of quality processes. Burns and Chisholm (2001) observed that the way in which academic quality assurance of WiL programs can be determined is through the study of learning outcomes and assessment schedules. This paper (which has been informed by a study of the literature and an audit of the WiL programs currently on offer at UOW) outlines the development of a cross-faculty model for the enhancement of academic standards in the assessment of WiL programs.
Work-integrated learning

There is a growing trend in Australian universities for the adoption of WiL across academic offerings (Fraser, 2006) which has been boosted by the competitive nature of the education market and the push from students for ways to increase their future employability. WiL programs facilitate student capacity to gain insights into the world of work and to observe structures, cultures, behaviours and expectations. Atkinson, Rizzetti and Smith (2005) reported that WiL has the potential to provide broader learning outcomes than classroom-based study and allows students to derive benefits in terms of academic, personal, careers and work skills development.

Whilst the trend of WiL is seeing an increase in its prevalence across institutions, the models for implementation and the supporting policies and practices vary. At the top end of the scale, universities such as Victoria University (2007) have stated that all students will take part in WiL for at least 25 per cent of their learning. Similarly, Griffith University (2005) has stated in its 2006–2010 University Strategic Plan for ‘70 per cent of programs to have an identifiable Work-integrated Learning component by 2010’. Other universities have established successful WiL projects, such as RMIT Business School’s Co-operative Learning and Professional Skills programs (Atkinson et al., 2005) and Swinburne’s WiL program, which is ‘a work-based project that requires students to undertake “real” projects that focus on work required by industry clients’ (Swinburne, 2006).

Mapping current practice at UOW

Across the faculties and units of UOW there is a wide variety of programs offered to students that involve some form of interaction with the workplace. From work placements and internships that form part of professional body requirements for a degree, to research projects conducted in conjunction with organisations in specific discipline areas, there are a number of different models of WiL employed across the university.

Most WiL initiatives fit into one of two categories: (1) curriculum-integrated programs for credit or mandatory, and (2) not for credit programs. The figure below provides a summary of these categories.

![Diagram of WiL programs at UOW](image)

**Figure 1: Work-integrated Learning Programs at UOW — for credit and not for credit categories**

An audit of WiL programs across the university was undertaken in order to examine the key elements that relate to the quality in the assessment of such programs. For each program, data was collected on the assessment structure, learning objectives, learning support activities, marking criteria, feedback, program/placement management, and eligibility for credit. The data was collected via a number of methods (including a search of the university handbook, website and subject outlines, as well as interviews with members of academic staff responsible for coordinating subjects with a WiL component).

As shown in Figure 1, the programs fall into two main categories: those for credit or mandatory and those that are not for credit. The first category covers what is often viewed as the most common form of WiL, the professional placement or internship, with a few exceptions such as the COMM290: Applied Learning subject. Many faculties and disciplines, including Education, Nursing, Exercise Science, Nutrition, Psychology, Engineering and the Graduate School of Medicine, have work placement requirements entrenched in their degree structures, most commonly to meet the requirements established by professional bodies.
For example, students in Education must complete several work placements and collect certain teaching evidence before they can be accredited to teach by the NSW Institute of Teachers.

Several non-academic units across UOW also offer students the opportunity to be involved in WiL programs. The Scholarships Office offer a WiL scholarship that requires students to undertake ten weeks of work experience during the summer vacation period in each year of their degree. Similarly, the three-year Black Opal program (run by the Centre for Student Development) provides students with an opportunity to develop leadership and teamwork skills alongside their university degree in collaboration with external organisations. The UOW Careers Service is one of the largest providers of cross-disciplinary WiL programs that include applied project-based activities (Univative Illawarra; The Employability Challenge), voluntary work experience programs (Employment Experience Program), and internships (The Careers Service Internship).

In parallel to the numerous models of WiL across the institution are the numerous methods of assessment adopted. The most commonly used assessment method across the programs audited at UOW was a report. The format and requirements of the report varied greatly and was dependent on the form of WiL adopted by a program. This method was followed closely by the reflective journal. Some subjects required oral presentations to be given and others had a related essay or exam on the material covered in classes relating to the work-integrated activities. From more of an employability perspective, the Arts faculty internship subject and the newly created Certificate in Global Workplace Practice have careers-related assessment deliverables (including resumes, mock job applications and mock interviews).

It was found that there was quite considerable disparity in the length of WiL placements. Some programs required placements of up to 10 weeks; others only required 48 hours. There was also disparity in the assessment structure in terms of the amount and frequency of assessment, with some programs requiring frequent, ongoing assessment, while some programs required only one piece of assessment (usually a report) at the completion of a work placement. On closer examination of assessments such as reports and reflective journals there was some fairly substantial difference in the size of the work to be submitted. Some reports and reflective journals were required to contain only 2000 words, whereas other reports and journals needed to be 5000–10,000 words or more.

Another element of the work-integrated activities and assessment was the relationship between the university and the host employer. In some programs the link between the two was quite strong, with shared expectations established and, in some cases, the opportunity for the host employer to participate in the decision regarding the marks awarded to students. References are commonly required from employers to report on a student’s performance in the work-integrated activity, which often contributes to the overall assessment grade awarded. In other programs the link between the university and the host employer is not as strong and the host employer is given no opportunity to contribute a view as to the student’s performance.

The model

In developing a model for the enhancement of academic standards in assessment of WiL programs, the main issues are addressed and presented in an accessible format. In order for the model to be applicable across disciplines and faculties, the elements identified were kept at a high level with the potential that they could be broken down to more discipline-specific applications if required. The model (see Figure 2) incorporates five elements that are important to the design of assessment of WiL and the enhancement of the associated academic standards.
Communication between university and host employer

Development of a communication strategy between the university and host employer to allow for the establishment of common expectations for the assessment.

Marking criteria

That clear guidelines for the marking of assessments be published so that students understand what is expected of them.

Assessment is supported by other learning activities

That there is a strong relationship between the assessment and the tasks and lessons incorporated in the program.

Frequency of assessment

That the assessment be given at appropriate intervals throughout the WiL program and adequate feedback be given.

Reflection and skill/quality development

That the design of the assessment task promotes student reflection on skills and/or qualities developed as part of the WiL activity.

Figure 2: Model for the enhancement of academic standards in assessment of WiL programs

Each of the elements of the model will now be examined in more detail.

**Communication between university and host employer**

It is vital that a strategy for communication between the university and the host employer be established from the outset of a WiL activity. In one example from the audit of WiL at UOW, it was reported that communication with the host employer was left to the responsibility of the students; however, this lead to confusion over the requirements of the host organisation in relation to providing a work-based problem for the assessment. Cases like these highlight the importance of establishing clear channels of communication between the host employer and the university. Whilst some communication with the host employer can be undertaken by the students, it is best from a quality perspective for communication protocols between the different parties to be set and used from the beginning of the WiL activity.

**Marking criteria**

The stating of explicit marking criteria for all WiL assessment helps students to understand exactly what is expected of them. Marking criteria allow the program designer to make clear the intention of the piece of assessment and can also be used in communication with host employers to establish a shared understanding of the work that students are required to undertake. Bates (2003) emphasises the value of using marking criteria to enhance the quality of learning saying that marking criteria ‘... should not be thought of as discrete categories but rather as integral aspects of a learning process that encompasses the totality of the experience and becomes a component of the development of deep learning’.

**Assessment is supported by other learning activities**

Bigg’s (1999) theory of constructive alignment states that it is important that all assessment activities be aligned with the learning objectives and learning activities of a program. In the case of WiL, it is necessary that the assessment does not sit out on its own in relation to the program as a whole, and that some form of support activities exist in order to provide students with the necessary skills and knowledge to complete the assessment task. In some current subjects at UOW this is evident, with classes on a range of skills and concepts given before the assessment of these skills is undertaken.
However, it is common in some other programs for there to be a single, final piece of assessment (usually a report or reflective diary) that is completed at the end of a placement without any other academic activities existing to support it. It is suggested in this model that the design of a WiL program should incorporate a balance of learning activities and assessments that help develop the skills that students will need to perform in their chosen work environment.

**Frequency of assessment**

As stated above, it was found that a number of WiL programs have only one final assessment, usually at the end of a work placement. Whilst this method of assessment allows for the evaluation of the overall WiL activity, it provides little support in terms of formative feedback and skills development for students. Yorke and Knight (2004) recommend that a range of assessment options should be adopted throughout a WiL program to balance formative and summative assessment types. By using a number of assessments placed at key points throughout the program, the development of student learning can be measured and students will have feedback on areas in which they might need more support. Formative assessment models are also good to develop student aptitude and skills that will assist students in completing later assessment tasks.

**Reflection and skill/quality development**

As students take part in WiL activities it is important that they reflect on the skills and qualities that they are developing as a result of their experiences. As Atkinson et al. (2005) stated, experience alone is not sufficient for learning to occur; instead ‘learners need to observe and reflect on the experience, develop concepts to make sense of the experience and then apply and test out these concepts through new experiences’. It is in making the connection between their experience, personal development and the academic theory that students can gain a holistic view of their profession (Morse, 2006). Therefore, the model prompts academics to incorporate some form of reflective activity to allow students to form these connections.

**Conclusion**

The subject of the academic standards of WiL is an emerging area of teaching and learning that is challenging subject developers and lecturers. The model presented in this paper is a work in progress and is yet to be presented to the reference group and/or other learning and teaching representatives at the university. Work is to continue on its development so that at the end of the year it can be presented to the UOW community as guidance for subjects/programs that are under review or for new subject/program applications. It is hoped that this developing model will have a positive impact on academics standards across the university.

**References**


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