

The changing professional development needs of the international work-integrated learning community

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INTRODUCTION

The practice of work-integrated learning (WIL) continues to expand across the higher education sector, with many universities introducing or expanding their WIL offerings to align curriculum more closely to employability outcomes (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017). Universities in Australia have rapidly developed WIL, with all universities offering WIL in almost all the disciplines (Universities Australia, 2019). In New Zealand, WIL has been given increasing attention with the Universities NZ, the peak body for NZ universities, DVCA's Committee creating a WIL sub-committee to develop national strategy, and with the University of Waikato introducing compulsory WIL for all undergraduates degrees (Muller et al., 2021). The Canadian government recognised WIL as crucial to economic advancement and provided CAD\$150 million to support work placement opportunities (Beaulne-Stuebing, 2019).

This rapid development presents challenges for staff involved with WIL practice, administration, teaching, curricular design, and research, many of whom were staff that have moved sideways into WIL (Zegwaard et al., 2019). In response to these needs, as well as a way to better connect WIL staff globally, a team developed the GLOBAL WIL modules to provide online professional development opportunities for WIL staff (Zegwaard et al., 2016), with the number of modules on offer recently expanded to six (Ferns et al., in press).

An international professional development needs survey was conducted in 2018 to better understand what the international professional development needs are for the WIL community and to guide the development of new GLOBAL WIL modules. This survey, the first of its kind, asked participants to rate the interest level and the perceived need for 24 professional development topics, with the international data published in IJWIL (Zegwaard et al., 2019), nationalised data presented at the national WIL conferences in Australia (Kay et al., 2018), Canada (McRae et al., 2018), and New Zealand (Hoskyn et al., 2018), and nationalised data shared with South Africa, UK, and Sweden.

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the practice of WIL, particularly practices reliant on work placement models of WIL where many placements shifted to online/remote work placements (Kay et al., 2020; Pretti et al., 2020). Alternative WIL models to work placements were rapidly developed or expanded to accommodate the restricted access to workplaces (Zegwaard et al., 2020), with a particular focus on non-placement models of WIL (Dean & Campbell, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic presented perhaps the most significant challenge faced by WIL practitioners (Zegwaard et al., 2020) with many educators resorting to ‘panic-gogy’ as learning content delivery changed to online (Dean et al., 2020).

In response to this rapidly changing landscape of WIL, the 2018 WIL Professional Development Survey was repeated, with the inclusion of additional topics, and also data collection around aspects of the impact of the pandemic. This paper here will discuss findings around the impact of COVID on WIL practitioners, the perceived importance of professional development topics, and shifts in importance compared to the 2018 study.

METHODS

Similar to the 2018 study, an anonymous online survey (using SurveyMonkey) was developed containing questions that explored aspects of demographics, accessibility to WIL professional development opportunities, and perceived professional development needs. Additional questions were added around the impact of COVID-19 and how these influence professional development needs.

All known WIL associations were approached to distribute the survey to their members, with data collected (so far) over a period from October, 2021 to March, 2022. The true number of participants approached (total sampling cohort) was difficult to determine as the associations were asked not to share their contact list. The total responses were 299, notably less than the 2018 survey of 688 responses. Responses were received from 11 countries, of which Australia and Canada were the largest cohorts. The reduced number of responses compared to the 2018 study were proportionally distributed over the same countries as the 2018 survey.

Data analysis was undertaken through Microsoft Excel and open-ended questions were thematically analysed. The combined international data is the focus of this paper, with fuller details to be published in IJWIL at a later date, and nationalised data to be presented at national conferences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Impact of COVID-19

Participants were asked about the impact of COVID-19 on their work-life, with 27% of participants indicating the impact was negative, 63% neutral, and 8% positive. Explanations provided by participants were generally mixed no matter how negative or positive they felt about the impact of COVID-19. Participants that indicated a negative impact mostly commented about the difficulty of securing work placements, especially where WIL was a core part of the curriculum, and also commented on the lack of face-to-face time with students, lack of opportunities for international placements, and the difficulty of balancing work-life/home-life. Participants who indicated a neutral response mostly

gave mixed comments where they indicated negative aspects (increase in workload, stress, managing problems, teaching and working online) as well as positive aspects (working from home, supportive colleagues, etc), with several commenting that 'on the balance' there was no change.

Participants that indicated positive impacts highlighted the advantage of working for the public service organisation (government funded) such as a university, and generally stated the impact of the pandemic was challenging but mostly positive. The comments suggested a common element of the positive impact was the relief of working in a (largely) publically funded sector where funding did not immediately change as a result of the pandemic.

The 27% of participants that indicated a negative impact of the pandemic described significant upheaval in their job situation, with many indicating that their positions were now less secure, and some indicating their roles within the institution had either changed or they were no longer with the institution. Generally across all participants, 41% identified lack of international travel as a challenging issue, 35% having less access to funds for professional development, 20% having more responsibilities, and 27% indicating they had less time for professional development.

Professional Development Needs

Most participants indicated that their professional development needs had not changed (72%), with 5% indicating that their needs had decreased, whilst 21% indicated it had increased. The latter group mainly described increases in professional development needs around working and teaching in an online environment, however, achieving equitable access for all students to WIL opportunities was also a recurring theme.

Participants were asked to select a maximum of only three topics of professional development (additional questions exploring general interests were also included but not presented here). This data allowed for the ranking of importance based on the ratings data, with the five most important and five least important topics presented in Table 1.

The survey included several additional topics not included in the 2018 study. Of the new topics added to the survey, *equity, diversity and inclusion in WIL* was rated as the most important topic, equal to *evaluating the quality and impact of WIL* (which was the most important topic in the 2018 survey). The other notable new topics of *delivering WIL online* ranked 6th, *engaging with workplaces, staff, and students* ranked 13th, and *entrepreneurial and enterprise* ranked 16th.

TABLE 1: The five most important and least important professional development topics

Five most important
Equity, diversity, and inclusion in WIL *
Evaluating the quality and impact of WIL *
Curricular design and mapping WIL activities to learning outcomes #
Engaging with industry/workplaces #
Health & Safety, risks, and legal requirements when engaging with WIL
Five least important
Developing group WIL projects/placements ^
Educational theories underpinning WIL ^
How to best match students to workplaces
Engaging effectively with faculty/academic staff
Providing feedback on assessments

Note: *, #, and ^ indicates an equal ranking order.

When comparing to the ranking order from the 2018 survey, the biggest increases in importance relevant to other topics (with new topics removed from the data) was observed for *Health and Safety* (up nine to 5th most important), and *setting up quality WIL*, *ethical dilemmas*, and *managing WIL staff* each up by five. Several professional development topics decreased relevant to the other topics, most notable of which *educational theories* dropping by 11, *matching students* dropping by seven, *engaging with faculty* dropping by six, and *internationalisation of WIL* dropping by five.

CONCLUSION

The survey data indicated that many members of the WIL community experienced significant changes to their work conditions due to the pandemic, however, many participants reporting that they had experienced both positive and negative impacts that, on the balance, resulted in participants indicating an overall neutral perception of the impact of COVID-19. The third of participants that reported overall negative impacts clearly experienced significant upheaval, including increases in responsibilities, role changes, and loss of positions. The common negative impact across the whole WIL community was less time and less funds to undertake professional development. The changes in importance of professional development needs are, to some extent, perhaps not surprising, with health and safety increasing the most in perceived importance. The high ranking of topics related to the online environment correlates with comments around the challenge of working and teaching online. The latter may also reflect the increase of importance of managing WIL staff, which would also have occurred predominantly in an online, remote environment. The data was collected end of 2021, at which point working and teaching in an online environment was well established; the high ranking of online delivery of WIL as a professional development need may be an indication that online WIL is becoming a more common model of WIL than prior the pandemic.

Albeit, it was encouraging that many participants reported a neutral impact of the pandemic, these participants also indicated there were many changes and challenges. The perceived neutral impact was, as indicated, on the balance of both negative and positive impacts, where further comments also

suggested that, despite the challenges, the sense of relief of having secure employment and the ability to successfully work within an online environment were also key factors to the perceived neutral impact.

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