

# Sources of stress and students' perceptions of their wellbeing during work placement

KARSTEN E. ZEGWAARD<sup>1, 2</sup>

GAIL ADAMS-HUTCHESON

*The University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand*

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Wellbeing in society has been subject to increasing discussion, with particular attention to students engaged in higher education. Students in higher education experience stress related to studies and finances in addition to experiencing two major life changes – shifting from school learning to more self-directed learning and becoming more independent and self-reliant. Work placements add further challenges for students, therefore, there is a need to gain new knowledge on the relationship between placements, wellbeing stressors, and support mechanisms to better understand placement challenges and mitigate impacts on students. A total of 146 students who recently completed work placements participated in an anonymous survey and results indicated that students almost unanimously encountered financial stress even if in paid work placements and made lifestyle choices in response to stress that may harm their wellbeing. Students also reported having to actively manage stress but held positive views about life comparable to the general population.

Keywords: Work-integrated learning, wellbeing, work placements, stress, finances, negative behaviors, support, unpaid

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## INTRODUCTION

The higher education sector is increasingly focused on student wellbeing (Konstantinou et al., 2023; Pascoe et al., 2019). This increasing attention is driven by the shifting student needs and reports of students struggling to manage their wellbeing (Norton, 2021; Office for Students, 2024). There has been growing concern about student wellbeing (Suldo et al., 2013) and whilst it is well recognized that educational institution-based interventions and support structures are important, these interventions operate in a complex space as many factors impact student wellbeing (Rickard et al., 2024). For students in higher education there are additional challenges, such as likely having shifted away from home to attend university, the challenges of exploring greater (less restricted) freedom around life choices, greater financial independence but with limited financial resources, and the transition from a closely guided learning environment to a more independent learning environment (Hewitt, 2019; Hicks & Swain, 2007).

Responding to student wellbeing issues, some countries have introduced legislation related to student wellbeing in higher education, such as the *Education (Pastoral Care of Tertiary and International Learners) Code of Practice* (New Zealand Government, 2021) – colloquially referred to as the Pastoral Care Code. This legislation outlines the legal requirements of higher education institutions to ensure the physical and mental wellbeing of all students. Across the globe, within the context of work-integrated learning (WIL) risk management (Cameron, 2013, 2017; Cameron et al., 2020; Fleming & Hay, 2021), many universities have been continuously reviewing, restructuring, and increasing resourcing of student support services, in addition to furthering understanding how students access support (Hoskyn et al., 2023).

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author: Karsten Zegwaard, [karsten.zegwaard@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:karsten.zegwaard@waikato.ac.nz)

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

Wellbeing in general is well-researched (Pleeging et al., 2021; Topp et al., 2015), including the wellbeing of students in higher education (Dodd et al., 2021; Khatri & Duggal, 2022). Despite students undertaking WIL being exposed to additional stressors, student wellbeing within WIL has been under-researched (Zegwaard, 2015), with only recent attention given to the topic (Taylor et al., 2023). WIL research has identified additional stresses students experience, including possible rejection through the selection process (Cormier & Drewery, 2017), possible relocation, new work environments, new colleagues, workplace expectations over and above education, and the complex social nature and reality of workplaces (Drysedale et al., 2022). Some recent research has explored inclusion (an important aspect of wellbeing) for minority groups (Mackaway et al., 2024; Mallozzi & Drewery, 2019) and linking stress during WIL to negative wellbeing outcomes (Drewery et al., 2019). Research has also found some positive wellbeing outcomes, such as how the relevance of WIL tasks enhances perceived wellbeing (Drewery et al., 2016) and how well-designed WIL experiences can enhance students' perception of quality of life (Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2018) and motivation to complete tasks (Drysedale & McBeath, 2014, 2018).

In this research, wellbeing is conceptualized as experiencing positive emotions by managing social, economic, personal, and physical factors during WIL (Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2018). Gillett-Swan and Grant-Smith (2018) discuss a conceptual model aimed at recognizing and appreciating student diversity in personal circumstance and experience when undertaking WIL. They argue that context, social networks, and wellbeing in other life domains all impact wellbeing outcomes. Therefore, our aim to include student voice works toward better illuminating the placement landscape, individual coping strategies, and both formal and informal support mechanisms building on the conceptual model approach to wellbeing.

Wellbeing of students on work placements has recently been explored within discipline-specific literature, including for disciplines with high pressure environments and long durations of unpaid compulsory work placements such as social work (Gair & Baglow, 2018; Hodge et al., 2021), nursing (Mills et al., 2020), teaching (Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2020), engineering (Lloyd et al., 2019), and medicine (Cohen et al., 2013). These studies identify financial hardship (Hemy et al., 2016), hours of work (Bexley et al., 2013), and emotional exhaustion (Collins et al., 2010) as causing significant student hardship. In contrast, our study examined student views about their wellbeing during or shortly after work placement (non-discipline specific) allowing student voice to be illuminated and new knowledge gained on the relationship between WIL placement, wellbeing stressors, and support mechanisms. Thus, we asked students to consider their support structures, as well as common challenges faced on work placement. In this way we could examine whether students gained adequate wellbeing support, and if not, why not. The research now discusses the extent to which students encounter stressors, how they respond to stressors, the level of need for wellbeing support, and if wellbeing help was sought on or shortly after placement completion.

## METHODS

The research was undertaken at a New Zealand university that offers two broad models of WIL: work placement WIL and non-placement WIL. Only work placements were the focus of this research. Work placement varied in length from 100 to 400 hours, with 38% being between 100-200 hours and 29% being 400 hours or more (typically placements are no longer than 400 hours). An online survey instrument was used through Qualtrics to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, which has the

advantage of both statistical analysis of main themes and student voice adding richness and complexity to responses allowing effective data triangulation. The participants were asked to complete the survey via relevant teaching staff to separate the researchers from the participants. The survey was sent to students nearing completion of their placements with a reminder a week after the placement had finished. Data was collected over a 12-month period to capture the different disciplinary practices around placement timing.

Students completed the anonymous 20-minute online survey containing 19 agreement statements (10-point Likert scale, with 1 = strongly disagree [or equivalent meaning], 5 = neutral/indifferent, 10 = strongly agree) around learning experience and stress, seven open-ended questions, and five demographic questions. The agreement statements were developed through exploring the literature and known challenges students experience on work placement.

The participant pool was estimated through enrolment numbers as ~1,500 and responses provided 146 completed and useable returns. A 10% return rate provides confidence of the reliability of the findings (Fosnacht et al., 2017) and the Cronbach Alpha reliability analysis of the 19 agreement statements indicated high reliability ( $\alpha = 0.807$ ) (Cohen et al., 2018). Quantitative analysis was undertaken using Microsoft Excel to determine descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) and significance of difference (paired and unpaired student t-tests). Qualitative data were systematically analyzed for themes using the approach described by (Cohen et al., 2018) to provide understanding to context to the quantitative results. Ethical research is core to achieving quality research (Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018), thus this research used informed consent and anonymous participation, and has ethical approval (HREC(Health)2022#36).

## RESULTS

### *Demographics*

The participants were 74% female, 23% male, and 3% other or did not identify as a particular gender – the high portion of female respondents reflected the proportion of students studying towards a teaching degree who were predominantly female. Most students were enrolled in teacher education (34%), engineering (13%), business/management studies (11%), nursing (6%), other undergraduate disciplines or postgraduate qualifications (15%), or did not indicate their study (21%). Even though the data was collect anonymously, the high proportion of students who did not identify their degree may indicate students trying to be less identifiable so as to more freely provide frank information or an attempt to protect people involved with adminstrating the work placement program. Students identified predominately as European (73%), Māori (17%), and other (10%), which closely resembles the New Zealand general population (StatsNZ, 2024). The average age was 25.5 years old.

### *Wellbeing and Stressors*

Generally, students' view about satisfaction of their wellbeing was lower ( $p < 0.01$ , paired analysis) during work placement than in general (Table 1). Students made comments related to greater stress during work placement, such as "they expect us to make up days that we miss (because our exhaustion is affecting our wellbeing) when classes are on and don't realise how that sets up for failure" (Master of Teaching and Learning student) and "other part-time job commitments in addition to the placement work can negatively affect wellbeing" (Bachelor of Science student). However, there was large variation within the data and 17% indicated their satisfaction with wellbeing was slightly higher during placement than in general. Students also reported that they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with

their physical health during placement, which aligned with comments related to physical exercise “I reduced going outside” (Bachelor of Science student).

TABLE 1: General wellbeing indicators, perceptions of wellbeing during work placement, proportion of students reporting a source of stress (n=142).

General wellbeing indicators *			During placement		
	Mean	SD		Mean	SD
Wellbeing satisfaction.	6.36	2.236	Wellbeing satisfaction	5.45	2.562
Feeling life is worthwhile	7.20	2.214	Physical health satisfaction	5.46	2.614
Feeling positive about the future	7.28	2.286	Coped well with stress	6.23	2.321

\* All ratings used a Likert range of 1-10 where, for example, 1 = strongly dissatisfied with wellbeing and 10 = strongly satisfied with wellbeing.

Students were asked to rate (1-10) the level of stress they have experienced (if any) related to a range of stressors (Table 2). The research found that all students experienced at least some stress and 83% of students experienced moderate to severe stress (5-10 Likert). The most common source of moderate to severe stress was finances followed by physical health. Some students also provided other sources of stress, which were generally rated as moderate to severe stress.

TABLE 2: The proportion of students who experienced any stress from a stressor and moderate to severe stress from a stressor.

Stressors	Slight to	Moderate	Stressors	Slight to	Moderate
	severe stress *	to severe stress *		severe stress	to severe stress
Any source	100%	83.4%	COVID-19	87.7%	25.3%
Financial	84.2%	67.1%	State of the world	87.7%	24.7%
Physical health	93.8%	52.1%	Student peers	87.0%	15.1%
Health of or needing to care for a family member	89.0%	33.6%	Living away from home	83.6%	14.4%
Work colleagues and supervisors	93.8%	30.1%	Other **	7.5%	6.8%

\* % of students who experienced any (1-10) stress and moderate to severe (5-10) stress. \*\* Other stressors included assessment, unable to concentrate, working full time, self-expectations, flooding (a reference to the New Zealand 2023 series of nature disasters).

There were numerous mentions of students struggling to complete placement tasks, work responsibilities, and university requirements, for example:

I simply did not have the time. I would come home, open my laptop and do more mahi [Māori word for work], and would spend weekends either doing paid work or catching up on uni mahi. (Masters in Teaching student)

I haven't been able to reduce my stress much as I had to work right after placement most days to afford to live, eat and get to placement. (Bachelor of Education student)

I feel that the work placement was a large contributing factor to my own bad wellbeing. However no notice was taken during the placement by supervisors, which was worsened by the fact that I saw my supervisor very infrequently. (Bachelor of Engineering student)

Numerous students also discussed having to manage stressful personal situations during work placement, for example:

Stresses at the time was we thought mum potentially might die or not get her mind back, so that was weeks of looking after her and prepping and stuff. So that made me a little unwell and stressed. Then that turned into not sleeping, got to a point where I was awake for 60+ hours which was affecting my cognitive abilities at work. I didn't want to call in sick as I thought I was just tired. (Bachelor of Engineering student)

We had whānau [Māori word for family] from overseas who ended up staying with us during my placement - this was good as it forced me to switch off from my work to socialize with them, though it did impact on my energy levels as I was 'burning the candle at both ends'. (Bachelor of Education student)

The cost of living was difficult. I am a mother of 5, studying full-time and working full-time. (Bachelor of Teaching student)

The stress levels were super high as I am a full time mother of two children (5 & 9 years), I also HAD to work 25 hours a week in my job, plus assignments, plus full time working (unpaid) for my placement. Very little support from partner at home [original emphasis]. (Bachelor of Teaching student)

Students also made comments of positive experiences during work placement, for example:

I did like the way the university allowed us to contact and choose our own placement. This was great for my wellbeing as I could contact a school close to me and also got to spend the placements on my preferred year levels. (Bachelor of Teaching student)

The company I interned at were amazing and provided all the support I required. (Degree not provided)

#### *Responses to Stress and Strategies to Reduce Stress*

Students were asked about changes to their behaviour that the literature recognises as unhealthy and common attributes that cause stress (Table 3). Many students reduced habits that were healthy for their wellbeing whilst some increased behaviors that eventually become harmful to their physical and emotional wellbeing. Thematical analysis of the open-ended question asking students if they tried to reduce or manage their stress showed that just under half indicated they did actively manage stress whilst just over half tried a range of different techniques.

TABLE 3: Various negative changes in behaviour by students during work placement, and steps taking to manage and reduce stress.

Responses to stress *		Strategies taken to manage stress *	
Reduced active lifestyle	65%	No response	45.2%
Reduced contact with others	62%	Being more organized	12.3%
Reduced healthy eating	52%	Talking to others	11.0%
Increased alcohol consumption	14%	Worked harder	8.2%
Increased or took up smoking or vaping	12%	Planned rest	7.5%
Other **	3%	Exercise	5.5%
		Good habits, meditating, breathing techniques	4.2%
		Talked to workplace or university supervisor	4.1%
		Setting boundaries	3.4%
		Stopped part-time paid work	2.7%
		Smoking	1.4%
		Other ***	3.5%

\* Students may have indicated more than one response and provided more than one strategy. \*\* reduced study time, time with partner, sleep, and going outside. \*\*\* Counselling, regular COVID testing, spending time with nature, avoiding certain people.

Students talked about actively managing stress with some success, for example:

I have tried to manage [stress] by adding more study time during the night and weekend. This has worked out for my study side of things but not my life balance as I try to reserve my weekends for family and myself. (Bachelor of Teaching student)

Being organized and having to spend all weekend doing work so I can spend time with my own children after school for an hour. (No degree given)

Putting aside time for myself and doing things I enjoy. Yes this worked, I made sure I had time on the weekend to focus on family or having down time. This meant doing a little less reading and uni work, but my mental health has been better for it. (Postgraduate Diploma Teaching student)

I reduced it [stress] by going to the gym, going swimming, going surfing and spending my weekends going on hikes. (Bachelor of Nursing student)

Students also indicated that managing stress was difficult and not successful, for example:

There was really little to no time for self care. Studying full time and motherhood doesn't allow time for self care. (Postgraduate Diploma in Teaching student)

Completely gave up paid work because it was impossible to do both. It did not work because now I'm further in debt. (Master in Nursing student)

There isn't really a possible way to reduce stress during placement as there are so many other factors of life that come into play. (Bachelor of Nursing student)

*Feeling, Wanting, Needing, and Finding Support during Work Placement*

Support during work placement is important, therefore, students were asked if they felt generally supported from various sources during work placement and the importance of this support (Table 4). If to interpret 'felt supported' as a measure of perceived support received and 'importance of support' as a measure of level of supported wanted, a statistical significance of difference shows that students wanted more ( $p < .01$ ) support than they received. Students made numerous mentions of the support they had, for example, "flatted with a good mate... couldn't have done it without him" (No degree given).

TABLE 4: The level of felt generally supported during work placement and importance of general support during work placement and significance of difference between both.

	Felt supported by		Importance of support by		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	p
Employer	8.09	2.296	9.14	1.509	0.001
University	6.56	2.887	7.66	2.699	0.001
WIL staff	6.41	2.935	7.63	2.593	0.001
Family	8.99	1.938	8.75	2.241	0.090
Friends	8.06	2.423	7.31	2.731	0.001 *
Peers	7.63	2.847	7.28	2.889	0.050 *

\* opposite difference to data above. Mean scores used a Likert range of 1-10

Students were asked if they had needed support for their wellbeing during work placements, with 30.0% indicating they did, 48.6% indicating that they did not, and 21.4% indicating that they were unsure if they needed support (Table 5). Of the 30% who needed support for wellbeing, nearly half did not find this support, however, all students that did find support said the support was helpful. Interestingly, a quarter of those who did not need support for wellbeing ended up finding or coming across support for wellbeing.

TABLE 5: The need for support for wellbeing during work placement and finding support for wellbeing.

Needed support for wellbeing during placement					
Definitely no	Probably no	Might/might not	Probably yes	Definitely yes	
24.3%	24.3%	21.4%	18.6%	11.4%	
Found support			Yes	No	Unsure
Those that probably or definitely needed support			23.8%	57.1%	19.0%
Those that probably or definitely did not need support			25.0%	47.1%	27.9%

Qualitative data provided some insight on why students did not find help, including mentions of not enough time (e.g., “I wasn’t able to access help because there was no time for it,” Master of Education student), logistics (e.g., “do not have the same access as online student,” Bachelor of Teaching student), defeatism (e.g., “I didn’t seek it, I didn’t see the point,” Diploma of Teaching student), trying to push through (e.g. “sucked it up, got on with it,” Bachelor of Education student), and out of choice:

I actually didn’t reach out to uni for help during the placement, or any sort of help. Kinda just kept my head down and tried to get on with it, but my workplace very often reminds everyone of the counselling service they provide everyone. (Bachelor of Engineering student)

### *Positive Experiences during Work Placement*

Students were asked to rate a series of indicators of learning during work placement, with students rating these as positive and very positive (Table 6). Even though the main focus of this research was on challenges to wellbeing that students may encounter on work placement, the additional general comment box at the end of the survey gathered a number of unsolicited comments about the positive learning experience during the work placement, for example, “the company I interned at were amazing” (no degree given), “... I think it’s been great, ... I am very happy about that, ...

perfect balance for me” (Bachelor of Engineering student), and “I love my placement and have had the BEST mentor teacher you could ever wish to have [original emphasis]” (Bachelor of Teaching student).

TABLE 6: Student reporting of positive feelings from the work placement experience.

Sentiment	Mean	SD
A sense of achievement	8.72	1.712
Key work-related skills	8.80	1.676
Self-confidence	8.16	2.195
Confidence with working for organizations	8.33	1.932
A clearer picture of my future career	8.63	1.978
Praise for my work	8.37	2.146
Other*	9.16	1.435

\*responses included a view of future challenges, public speaking, planning abilities, working under pressure, professional collaborations. Mean score used a Likert range of 1-10.

## DISCUSSION

### *General Wellbeing*

Students generally felt positive about life and the future (Table 1) and felt slightly satisfied about their wellbeing. Students indicated being only slightly satisfied about their wellbeing may perhaps be cause for general concern, it is, however, reflective of the general New Zealand population (Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment, 2022). A national wellbeing study conducted in 2021 compared different age groups views on wellbeing showed no statistical differences between the age groups of 15-24 and 25-34 years (common ages of students in higher education) and all other age groups



population except for over those over 65 years who were more satisfied with their wellbeing (StatsNZ, 2021).

### *Wellbeing during Work Placement*

Despite holding similar overall views of satisfaction of wellbeing as the general population, students generally rated their satisfaction of their wellbeing during work placement significantly ( $p < .01$ ) lower, with some students indicating large decreases in satisfaction of wellbeing during work placement. There was large variation in the data ( $SD = 2.241$ ), with 17% of students indicating a small improvement of wellbeing during placement, highlighting the highly individual nature of the student experiences during the workplace experiences and students' different capabilities for managing stress.

All students encountered some stress during work placement and all students encountered at least some of the the stress indicators used in this study, however, not all stressors caused moderate or severe stress (Table 2). For example, 84% of students experienced some stress caused by living away from home, however, only 14% of students were moderately or severely stressed by this, therefore, it is more useful to focus on the moderate to severe stress levels rather than any stress level. Financial stress was the most common source of moderate to severe stress, with 67% students experiencing this as moderate to severe stress. Students in unpaid placements more commonly experienced moderate to severe stress about finances (80%) than those on paid placements (24%), similar to the study reported by Grant-Smith et al. (2017). In other research, especially in social science which is dominated by unpaid work placements, financial stress is commonly reported by students (Baines et al., 2016; Charlesworth et al., 2015; Hodge et al., 2021) and internationally is a current topical debate (Alonso, 2023; O'Carroll & Kassam, 2024; Pike, 2024).

Many students indicated they reduced physical activity during placement, half the students were moderately or severely stressed about their physical health during placement, and overall rated neither a positive nor a negative view of their physical health satisfaction. In addition with people feeling they cannot afford the rising costs for accessing healthcare (Taber et al., 2015) and the financial stress students are experiencing, this may have heightened students' concern about their physical health.

The health of and the needing to care for a family member was a moderate to severe source of stress for 34% of students, with the students making numerous mentions of caring for children and having family responsibilities. A similar number of students also expressed being moderately or severely stressed about work colleagues and supervisors, reflecting the authentic nature of work placement experiences and the expectations within (Jackson & Cook, 2023; Martin et al., 2019b; Winchester-Seeto et al., 2022). Students went on to indicate that confidence with working for an organization was greatly improved by being on work placement, suggesting that despite it is a source of stress, many students are successfully managing the stress and workplace expectations.

### *Feeling, Wanting, Needing, and Finding Support during Placement*

#### *Feeling and wanting support during placement*

Students generally felt well supported during their placement, with respondents indicating the greatest general support received was from the employer (Table 4). Given the full immersion nature of the work placements, the workplace supervisor has a crucial role in supporting students during the work placement (Martin & Hughes, 2011; Martin et al., 2019a; Peach et al., 2014; Winchester-Seeto et al., 2016). Students also thought support from other sources were important, indicating that all sources were crucial, with the employer viewed as the most important and family as second. Interpreting 'felt

supported' as a measure of how much support was received and 'importance of support' as a measure of how much support was wanted, students indicated that despite feeling well supported, they wanted more ( $p < .001$ ) support from employers, the university, and WIL staff than what they had received from these sources. There was, however, an opposite relationship between felt support and importance of friends and peers. This may not indicate wanting less support from friends and peers, rather this likely reflects that students are surrounded and in regular contact with friends and peers.

#### *Needing and finding support for wellbeing during placement*

When asked if students needed support for their wellbeing during work placement, about a third of students indicated they probably or definitely needed support. More concerningly, of those that probably or definitely needed support for the wellbeing, 57% did not find that support. Often these students did not provide reasons for why they did not find support, however, those that did provide reasons indicated that they chose not to seek support (e.g., putting my head down, carrying on), thought wellbeing support would not be helpful (e.g., I didn't see the point), and found it too difficult to find (e.g., there was no time for it). These student experiences indicate difficulties in accessing wellbeing support when needed and perhaps a lack of understanding of the possible positive benefits of receiving support. Our research indicates support should be more readily accessible and students should be actively encouraged to seek out wellbeing support.

Of those that probably or definitely needed support during placement and found this support, these students indicated that the support mostly came through friend and family networks, but also included the workplace and the university, with all comments indicating that the support received was helpful. There was a cohort of students who needed support but were unsure if they found support, which may mean these students sought support, found something intended to be helpful, but these students were unsure if it was helpful. These findings are consistent with the literature, which indicates a significant hurdle to supporting wellbeing is for those who need the support to access the support (Salaheddin & Mason, 2016), and suggests that when the various support structures are accessed, they are mostly effective in supporting the student. This finding highlights the importance of ensuring that students are able to remain connected with their friends and family networks during work placement, especially where physical distance is a factor.

WIL contains inherent risk that must be navigated (Cameron, 2017) and educational institutions have responsibilities for ensuring that the students are experiencing safe learning experiences (Cameron, 2020; Cameron et al., 2020; Fleming & Hay, 2021). Site visits, 'checking in', or a regular online drop-in session with WIL staff is crucial in ensuring students have access to support and feel supported (Taylor et al., 2023; Winchester-Seeto et al., 2016) and enhances their sense of belonging (Rowe et al., 2021).

Interestingly, of the students who indicated that they probably or definitely did *not* need support for their wellbeing, a quarter indicated they found support anyway. This suggests that students who are not needing support, and likely were not looking for support, are still encountering wellbeing support structures. This indicates that existing support structures do reach students on work placement, including reaching those who do not need support, however, this reach is only partial.

#### *Responses to Stress*

Students in this study indicated changes in behavior that are known to negatively impact physical and mental wellbeing. During work placement, most students reduced physical activity, contact with others, and healthy eating. These responses are commonly experienced by students (Canadian Institute for Health, 2005; Stults-Kolehmainen & Sinha, 2014) and can eventually negatively affect social and

emotional functioning, impairing their ability to effectively engage in study and work (Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2018; Halladay et al., 2019). Considering that the students who needed support and found support do so largely through family and friend networks, the high portion of those who reduced contact with others is of grave concern. Furthermore, about 14% students indicated they increased alcohol consumption and vaping/smoking during placement, which directly and immediately contributes to financial stress, the main stress students encountered during work placement, indicating potentially a self-destructive pattern of behavior. These negative behaviors will negatively influence wellbeing and physical health (Kim & Oh, 2017; Papadaki et al., 2018; Parackal & Parackal, 2017).

Stress is common (Davis & Mantler, 2004) and low to moderate stress might have some beneficial effects such as enhanced performance and resilience (Du et al., 2009; Herman et al., 2015), however, severe stress, especially ongoing (chronic) severe stress, has a range of negative effects on physical and emotional wellbeing (Garfin et al., 2018; Marin et al., 2011), therefore, strategies to sustainably manage moderate to severe stress are particularly important (Lupien, 2012). Just over half of the students reported actively managing their stress with recognized effective approaches (Crampton et al., 1995; Panigrahi, 2016) such as being more organized, talking to others, planned rest, and exercise being most common, with lesser mention of meditation, breathing techniques, self-care apps, talking to the manager, and boundary setting. Some students indicated that they were managing stress by pushing themselves harder to complete the work. These students provided comments suggesting pushing themselves harder was a positive achievement (e.g., “make sure I have done all required work...as soon as I got home...so I could focus on relaxing”) whilst others provided some comments suggesting a chronic negative work-approach (e.g., “just get on with it,” “I just tried to forget about it,” and “suck it up”).

The capacity to manage stress also varies per person (McCabe et al., 2016). The students who indicated they did not encounter any moderate to severe stress during work placement thought they coped better ( $p < 0.05$ ) with stress than those who did encounter moderate to severe stress. However, the high level of variation at mid point of both scales highlights the highly individualistic nature of work placement experiences.

Just under half of the students indicated they took no steps to manage stress despite that these students reported the same levels of stress and same ability in managing stress as those who did report actively managing stress. Within the context of work placements, the students who did not report actively managing their stress may be the students who thought seeking support may not be helpful or saw the stress during work placements as temporary, and that they are able to push their way through (e.g., “knowing that the placement was only temporary” (Bachelor of Business student). However, several students who did not actively manage their stress made comments of being very stressed and went on to describe stressful and difficult experiences that likely would have needed support and active wellbeing management.

#### *Positive Impacts of Work Placements on Student Wellbeing*

Much attention in this research has been given above on the stresses students encounter during work placements, however, students also indicated positive experiences during their work placement. It is well accepted in the literature that WIL enhances students employability (Campbell et al., 2022; Coll & Zegwaard, 2012; Jackson & Cook, 2023; Rowe & Winchester-Seeto, 2022) and career clarification (McIlveen et al., 2011; Zegwaard & Coll, 2011), which can enhance student self-efficacy (Drysdale & McBeath, 2014; Jackson & Cook, 2023; Raelin et al., 2011). Students views in this research aligned with

the literature as they strongly believed they developed employability skills, career awareness, and confidence.

Generally, the overall findings of the research, both the negative impacts on wellbeing and the positive outcomes of completing a work placement aligns with the concept that overcoming challenges builds resilience and confidence to successfully manage similar challenges in the future (Drysdale et al., 2022; Waxman et al., 2003). Enhancing student resilience has long been identified as important because it enhances their ability to persist and be motivated in the face of future difficult challenges (Mate & Ryan, 2015) and have a greater sense of personal autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2012).

## CONCLUSION

This research found that students generally had positive experiences during work placements in line to what is commonly reported in the literature, however, the aim of this research was to focus on challenges to wellbeing. The research found that some students are encountering significant stresses during work placement, of which financial stress was the most common source of moderate to severe stress. Despite having general views of wellbeing satisfaction akin to the general population, student views of wellbeing satisfaction was significantly lower during work placement. However, it was also evident that student experiences were highly individualistic and variable, as some students did not encounter significant stress and even reported increases in wellbeing satisfaction during work placement. Some students indicated that they adopted negative behaviors in response to stress that may negatively impact their physical and mental wellbeing, and exacerbated their stress related to finances and physical health, such as increasing alcohol consumption and smoking/vaping whilst reducing contact with others.

A third of the students reported that they probably or definitely needed support for their wellbeing during placement, with only half of these students finding this support. However, students who did not need support for wellbeing did come across support. This indicates support is reaching some students while in work placement, however, this reach needs to be widened. Where students found wellbeing support, it was often through family and friends, highlighting the importance of ensuring that students are able to maintain regular and quality contact time with family and friends during work placements.

Enhancing resilience of students and providing coping mechanisms to manage stress are important preparation content for students prior to embarking on work placement, and successfully managing challenges during work placement will increase self-confidence and self-efficacy. However, the extent of stress students experienced highlights the urgent need to further investigate student wellbeing during placement and how to better provide support for students' wellbeing.

### *Recommendations*

Through the findings of this research, the following recommendations are made:

- Students thought friends, peers, and families were important sources of support, therefore, it is important that students on work placement can maintain contact with these support sources.
- More than half of the students who needed support for their wellbeing did not seek or receive that support. Therefore, there is a need for institutional support structures to be more readily discoverable and accessible for students during work placement.

- Student comments indicated that when wellbeing support was needed some students selected to not seek out support because they perceived it may not be useful, however, students that did seek and found support indicated that it was useful. Therefore, there is a need to develop greater awareness of the benefits of receiving wellbeing support when it is needed.
- To maintain regular interactive and empathetic contact between the student on work placement and the WIL staff through, for example, site visits, phone contact, video meetings, and/or regular online drop-in sessions.
- Provide student preparation material and learning activities before work placement focused on how to manage stress effectively and healthily, and how to build and maintain resilience.
- The literature indicates that students successfully overcoming challenges builds resilience and confidence. Therefore, there is a need to scaffold WIL experiences and relevant learning (and the challenges within) that builds up to a work placement so to build up student resilience and abilities to more successfully manage the stresses encountered during a work placement.

#### *Limitations and Further Research*

The research has limitations and a number of recommendations for future research are made:

- The research method required students to self-report their perception of their wellbeing and stress. Even though these experiences will feel real to the students, it has the potential for overreporting bias and being limited by students' lacking full understanding of the concepts of wellbeing and stress. A study that measures set criteria as indicators of wellbeing and stress rather than having students self-report may provide more robust findings.
- Students reported an increase in potentially harmful behaviors during work placement in response to stress, however, the research did not explore if students returned to more healthy behaviors after the work placement. Longitudinal studies of changes in student behaviors that could positively or negatively impact their wellbeing during different stages of their studies, including work placements, would be particularly insightful for developing appropriate support structures at crucial stages of their studies.
- Support structures were successful in reaching some students, including those who did not need support, however, support structures also did not reach those who did need support. Generally, when students found support, they thought the support was helpful. Further research is required on techniques and structures that effectively provide access to wellbeing support for students and how to increase student awareness of support structures and their benefits during work placement.

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## About the Journal

The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning (IJWIL) publishes double-blind peer-reviewed original research and topical issues related to Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). IJWIL first published in 2000 under the name of Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education (APJCE).

In this Journal, WIL is defined as:

*An educational approach involving three parties – the student, educational institution, and an external stakeholder – consisting of authentic work-focused experiences as an intentional component of the curriculum. Students learn through active engagement in purposeful work tasks, which enable the integration of theory with meaningful practice that is relevant to the students' discipline of study and/or professional development (Zegwaard et al., 2023, p. 38\*).*

Examples of practice include off-campus workplace immersion activities such as work placements, internships, practicum, service learning, and cooperative education (co-op), and on-campus activities such as work-related projects/competitions, entrepreneurships, student-led enterprise, student consultancies, etc. WIL is related to, and overlaps with, the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training.

The Journal's aim is to enable specialists working in WIL to disseminate research findings and share knowledge to the benefit of institutions, students, WIL practitioners, curricular designers, and researchers. The Journal encourages quality research and explorative critical discussion that leads to the advancement of quality practices, development of further understanding of WIL, and promote further research.

The Journal is financially supported by the Work-Integrated Learning New Zealand (WILNZ; [www.wilnz.nz](http://www.wilnz.nz)), and the University of Waikato, New Zealand.

## Types of Manuscripts Sought by the Journal

Types of manuscripts sought by IJWIL is primarily in two forms: 1) *research publications* describing research into aspects of work-integrated learning and, 2) *topical discussion* articles that review relevant literature and provide critical explorative discussion around a topical issue. The journal will, on occasions, consider good practice submissions.

*Research publications* should contain; an introduction that describes relevant literature and sets the context of the inquiry. A detailed 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 to current established literature, implications for practitioners and researchers, whilst remaining mindful of the limitations of the data, and a conclusion preferably including suggestions for further research.

*Topical discussion articles* should contain a clear statement of the topic or issue under discussion, reference to relevant literature, critical and scholarly discussion on the importance of the issues, critical insights to how to advance the issue further, and implications for other researchers and practitioners.

*Good practice and program description papers.* On occasions, the Journal seeks manuscripts describing a practice of WIL as an example of good practice, however, only if it presents a particularly unique or innovative practice or it was situated in an unusual context. There must be a clear contribution of new knowledge to the established literature. Manuscripts describing what is essentially 'typical', 'common' or 'known' practices will be encouraged to rewrite the focus of the manuscript to a significant educational issue or will be encouraged to publish their work via another avenue that seeks such content.

By negotiation with the Editor-in-Chief, the Journal also accepts a small number of *Book Reviews* of relevant and recently published books.

### Reference

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