

Introducing the global work-integrated learning modules: Global connectivity for practitioners

SONIA J. FERNS

Curtin University, Perth, Australia

JUDIE KAY

WACE, Australia/Canada

KATHARINE HOSKYN

Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand

KARSTEN E. ZEGWAARD

University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand

KRISTINA JOHANSSON

University West, Trollhättan, Sweden

NORAH MCRAE

University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

INTRODUCTION

As the focus on strengthening graduate employability intensifies for institutions, work-integrated learning (WIL) has become a strategic priority for higher education globally (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017). The need for a highly skilled workforce to sustain the economy is driving mounting pressure to equip graduates with capabilities to navigate the volatile workplace and contribute to the social and commercial aspects of humanity (Dacre Pool et al., 2019). To achieve this imperative, staff with the capacity to design, deliver, and assess quality WIL learning experiences are essential. The concept of the Global WIL modules was driven by a pressing need for professional development globally as the profile of WIL grows and is increasingly a strategic priority for institutions worldwide (Zegwaard et al., 2019).

BACKGROUND

Professional development for staff to build capability for those involved in WIL is seen as a critical element of effective programs (Cooper et al., 2010; Patrick et al., 2014). Institutions and university networks have provided professional development, but the expansion of WIL has seen increasing demand for professional development for staff. National WIL Associations have played the major role in the provision of professional development in their countries and have played a crucial role in driving collaboration among the associations and with the World Association of Cooperation Education (WACE) to provide immediate support to the WIL community during this time (Rowe et al., 2022). The COVID pandemic was the catalyst for a swift transition to new WIL approaches, thereby intensifying the need for staff support (Kay et al., 2020).

The Global WIL Modules, first offered in 2015, set out to complement the professional development being offered in institutional and national settings by drawing together participants from across the

world to reflect and discuss important WIL themes from a global perspective. The intent was to enable participants unable to attend face-to-face international events, to access global professional development through online modules. For many participants, involvement in the modules was their first global experience. Participants contribute an administrative fee that covers the cost of processing applications and support for the Learning Management System (LMS). The design and facilitation of modules is undertaken voluntarily by the Global WIL Team.

The Global WIL modules evolved from a longstanding collaboration among a group of committed higher education professionals who collectively had extensive expertise on WIL. The Global WIL Team comprises six practitioners from four countries, and at the time were representatives of four national peak bodies for WIL: ACEN (Australia), WILNZ (New Zealand), CEWIL (Canada), and VILAR (Sweden). Success of the Global WIL Team can be attributed to the long term, collaborative relationships premised on mutual respect; a shared willingness to explore new ideas and expand Global WIL offerings; adopting a model of distributed leadership (Patrick et al., 2014) and international interactions.

ENHANCING GLOBAL STAFF CAPABILITY

As WIL offerings diversify and expand, the capabilities required of staff to design and deliver quality WIL are shifting (Kay et al., 2019). Enacting successful WIL programs where partnerships with external stakeholders are pivotal, and the design and execution of curriculum and assessment approaches integral, demands highly skilled staff with relevant expertise (Zegwaard et al., 2019). The desired capabilities differ from those required for the traditional university setting where typically 'teaching' is the focus as opposed to facilitating learning and empowering the learner via WIL methodologies (Zegwaard et al., 2022).

To identify gaps in staff capabilities and ascertain priority areas, a 24-item survey was administered via national WIL associations and WACE to capture data from participants from a range of international locations. Ethical approval was granted from the University of Waikato, New Zealand. The survey was initially distributed in 2018 and again in 2022 and affirmed demand for professional development globally with key topics identified as 'pressing professional development needs' by survey respondents (Zegwaard et al., 2019). This informed the focus and progression of the Global WIL Modules.

To date, five modules have been developed and delivered. The modules were launched in 2015 with *Global Perspectives in WIL*, a foundational module intended to enhance understanding of the relationship between WIL and learning theories. Given that industry engagement is imperative to WIL, *Industry Engagement for WIL* followed in 2017. This module provided participants with the skills to foster collaborative partnerships premised on reciprocity. As WIL evolved it became evident that the need to understand and ensure the quality of WIL became more critical. This focus on quality WIL was the catalyst for the *Dimensions of Quality for WIL* that explores the concept of WIL quality and encourages reflection on potential improvements to ensure quality of WIL programs. *Learning and Assessment in WIL* was first offered in 2020. This module considers assessment of authentic learning with insights about the nature of knowledge and learning, WIL pedagogy and the purpose of assessment. *Student Engagement* is the fifth module in the suite of offerings and was available for the first time in 2021. This

module highlights the importance of student engagement to successful WIL outcomes and investigates students' behavioral, emotional, and intellectual connection to their learning. A central theme of all modules is global connectivity and collaboration to broaden participants' perspectives.

MODULE DESIGN AND DELIVERY

Modules are designed to optimize the value of international collaboration and facilitate ongoing global networking for participants. Participants engage in both online synchronous and asynchronous discussions about topical issues relevant to the module. Reflection on the conversations and insights gleaned from readings and fellow participants, is critical for developing participants' self-awareness and reference to their practice.

The Global WIL Team works collaboratively to orchestrate a module descriptor and five action-oriented learning outcomes. To ensure modules are progressive and connected, learning outcomes are devised to complement knowledge and skills acquired in other modules. Once the module curriculum is confirmed, a module plan is developed that encompasses a week-by-week overview outlining module activities. Weekly activities comprise readings, reflections on readings, responding to peers' posts, online discussion questions, and webinars. Initially, two webinars were conducted for each module. In 2020, this was increased to three webinars in response to participants' feedback requesting more synchronous webinars as the opportunity to connect with colleagues from around the world was perceived as 'powerful' for their professional development. The duration of each module is eight weeks, with the final week dedicated to participants posting a reflection on their learnings and how they might adapt their future practice. To ensure continual improvement of modules and delivery, a pre- and post-survey is administered to participants. The Learning Management System is hosted by The University of Waterloo in Canada. Both the enhancement of technology over time and the increased ease and use of technology resulting from COVID -19 has enhanced the interactivity and engagement.

APPROACH

To ascertain the impact of the Global WIL modules, thematic analysis of participants' qualitative reflections completed by each participant at the end of each module was undertaken. A sample of 81 reflective comments were coded to identify frequently occurring themes evidencing the impact of the module on participants' professional capabilities. A second coder validated initial coding.

The question guiding the investigation was: What is the impact of participation in the Global WIL modules and the benefits of interacting with colleagues globally on participants' professional practice?

Participants

Initially the modules were restricted to members of the four National WIL Associations but were subsequently opened to all countries. Two hundred and five people from an increasingly diverse range of countries have now completed the modules. Australians and Canadians make up 43% and 39% respectively of completions to date. Table 1 outlines the number of participants from each country.

TABLE 1: Number of Global WIL participants by country

Country of the participant	Number of participants
Australia	91
Canada	83
New Zealand	15
Sweden	6
Vietnam	6
Singapore	1
Japan	2
USA	1
Total	205

Module Completion

Between 2015 and 2021, modules were offered 16 times with 263 completions, with some participants completing more than one module. Table 2 provides an overview of modules including the inaugural delivery of each module, the number of times offered, and the number of participants who completed each module.

TABLE 2: Delivery of modules and completions

	First offered	Number of times offered	Number of completions
Global Perspectives in Work-Integrated Learning	2015	6	107
Industry and Community Engagement for Work-Integrated Learning	2017	4	72
Dimensions of Quality for Work-Integrated Learning	2019	3	38
Learning and Assessment in Work-Integrated Learning	2020	2	27
Student engagement	2021	1	19
Total		16	263

THEMES EVIDENT IN PARTICIPANT REFLECTIONS

Analysis of participants' reflections revealed the six key themes including: Building global networks, Gaining global perspectives, Affirming WIL practice, Accessing global WIL research, Implementing new WIL strategies, and Space for reflections. Each theme is described below with examples of participants' reflections that capture the essence of the theme and highlight the impact of the Global WIL Modules.

Building Global Networks

Participants valued connecting with knowledgeable colleagues from around the world, learning from each other and developing a global network.

My favorite components of the Global WIL courses are the webinars and the ability to connect synchronously with many colleagues from around the world (Canadian participant).

Gaining Global Perspectives

A positive outcome for many participants was the perspectives and insights about how WIL works in different contexts globally, realized through participants' generosity, collegiality, and willingness to share.

... it has been a great experience to learn how WIL operates in more detail in other countries and contexts, and to meet other like-minded professionals who are passionate and engaged as myself (Australian participant).

Another excellent facet of this course was the engagement with and perspective drawn from diverse countries. Coming to understand different WIL practices and forms in the readings and engaging with perspectives from practitioners within those contexts provided good insights (Canadian Participant).

Affirming Work-Integrated Learning practice

Through sharing WIL practice and challenges, participants realized they were not alone in the challenges they faced and subsequently gained confidence in their practice.

It was nice to know that there are others who are experiencing all the complexity, nuance, challenges, and rewards that go along with WIL (Australian Participant).

Accessing Global Work-Integrated Learning Research

Accessing WIL research enabled participants to broaden their knowledge and underpin research to practice. Exposure to contemporary WIL research built confidence and reassurance in participants' practice.

This course has definitely helped to broaden my conceptual knowledge base of WIL and expose me to issues encountered by WIL practitioners in different countries (American Participant).

I feel empowered having access to the diverse research papers that can offer guidance or reassurance on almost all possible areas of WIL (Australian Participant).

Implementing New Work-Integrated Learning Strategies

Participants gained ideas and strategies that they planned to implement to enhance WIL practice in their institutions.

I'm finishing this module with some clearer ideas about how [] we can strategize more effectively to strengthen our current industry partnerships (New Zealand Participant).

There are so many more lessons that I have learned through this course and I believe that it could be a tool for me to brainstorm and map out more programs for our students (Vietnamese Participant).

I think it is remarkable outcome of participating in this module that I was able to complete the planning and application for a new internship course based on the knowledge from this module (Japanese Participant).

Space for Reflection

Participants valued the space to reflect and examine their WIL practice and viewpoints afforded through module participation. Opportunities to build global networks enabled a broader perspective.

The course has caused me to reflect on my own biases with respect to what matters in WIL (Canadian Participant).

Completing this module has made sure that I have made time each week to read relevant literature and the weekly discussion boards and webinars has provided me with valuable resources and comments on current best practice (New Zealand Participant).

The themes that resonated throughout the Global WIL participants' reflections highlight that the modules have a positive impact on professional development and participants benefit from creating and strengthening global networks. Connecting with colleagues globally enables a broader perspective of WIL practice, instills greater confidence in personal practice, and encourages participants to implement innovative WIL strategies. Importantly, the modules allow space for self-reflection, a critical aspect of professional growth and continual improvement.

CONCLUSION

Consistent interest in the modules validates the global applicability of topics and confirms the need for professional development. Thematic analysis of participants' reflections substantiate the value and impact of the Global WIL modules and highlight the professional benefits of global collaboration. Opportunities to build global networks facilitate a broader perspective on WIL and affirm participants' practice. Furthermore, enhanced awareness of research into WIL provides insight and encourages the adoption of innovative approaches to WIL. Space for reflection has proved to be a powerful enabler where participants have space to reflect on what they have learned and ascertain affirmative action for improving WIL practice.

The Global WIL Team is currently developing a capstone module in which participants design and enact a WIL project which consolidates their learning across modules. Upon completion of five modules and the capstone, participants are awarded a globally recognized certificate issued by WACE, in partnership with the Global WIL Team, as formal recognition of their achievements.

The success of the Global WIL modules is enabled through the voluntary contributions of six collaborative professionals with the support of national WIL associations, and the commitment of global practitioners worldwide to ensure quality WIL experiences for students. The aspiration is to grow and sustain the Global WIL suite of modules beyond where it is now and continue to enhance global professional development of WIL.

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