

Practicing equity, access and inclusion in work-integrated learning

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As work-integrated learning (WIL) expands in higher education, there is increasing attention on ensuring equitable access and inclusion for all students. These challenges are not unique to WIL, albeit WIL has some unique facets, but are pertinent to all parts of higher education and society more broadly. The WIL community recognizes that equity, diversity, and inclusion is their most significant professional development need, and with scholarship slowly on the rise, it is timely for a Special Issue dedicated to the topic within the context of WIL. This Special Issue includes 12 papers exploring equity, access, and inclusion within the context of WIL. Emergent themes include language, common barriers, disclosure, considerations for inclusive workplaces, curriculum, and assessments, as well as critical reflection, partnering with students, and resilience. It is intended that this Special Issue will continue the advancement of the journey for a more equitable society.

Keywords: Equity, access, inclusion, equitable practices, discrimination, disclosure, language, barriers

INTRODUCTION

Governments' increased focus on employability outcomes from higher education continues to drive the expansion of work-integrated learning (WIL) across the higher education curriculum (Jackson & Dean, 2022; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017). WIL is an authentic and meaningful learning approach that provides significant benefits for the student, employer, and institution (Aprile et al., 2023; Fleming et al., 2023; Jackson & Cook, 2023). Despite the range of advantages WIL affords, it also creates some complex challenges, including equitable access to WIL for all students (Ferns et al., 2014).

Equity in Society

Equity in society is underpinned by an assemblage of values and ideas related to human rights, but at its heart is a belief in the fair and just treatment of all individuals or groups across all social systems including education, work and government (Blanchard, 1986; Callender et al., 2020; Guy & McCandless, 2012, 2020; Rizvi & Lingard, 2011). Equity in society acknowledges systemic inequalities where history, policy, and processes have disadvantaged some individuals or groups in comparison to others. Social equity seeks to address disparities between those with advantage and those without, which it does through the [re]distribution of resources, services and opportunities according to specific individual or group needs (Guy & McCandless, 2012). This involves institutions considering equity in policy and administration design and delivery (i.e., procedural equity) to support more equal outcomes either immediately or sometime in the future (i.e., outcomes equity) (Guy & McCandless, 2012). Fundamental to social equity is that the treatment of people should not be equal, but vary based on what people need so inequalities are not maintained or extended (Guy & McCandless, 2012; Henningsen et al., 2021). Equity in society is difficult to achieve, possibly because it is not a static concept, with views on fairness and justice constructed and reconstructed according to norms and values within and across time and

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context (Blanchard, 1986). Notions of equity can be contested and how it is calculated may change and responsibilities may shift (Rizvi & Lingard, 2011). Equity within a neo-liberal paradigm, for example, is set against a dominant backdrop that frames a successful life in economic terms. The emphasis is on the state's responsibility to create conditions for individuals to build human capital to compete in the open market and it is the individual's responsibility, and choice, to make the most of opportunities so they can participate (see, e.g., Bonanno, 2017). This narrow conceptualization of social equity relies on an assumption that individuals share this view of a successful life and have equal capacity to engage with opportunities including engaging with educational pursuits.

Equity in Higher Education

In higher education, equity is concerned with fair access, participation, and outcomes, and for decades it has been an important policy focus of many governments worldwide (Bradley et al., 2008; Connell-Smith & Hubble, 2018; Kelly, 2010; Trow, 2007). This is because education is positioned as a good, something that affords important private individual benefits that help people improve life outcomes while also delivering broader social and economic public benefits (Marginson, 2016; OECD, 2023; World Bank, 2021; Zacharias & Brett, 2019). Post the 2008 global financial crisis and the more recent COVID-19 caused economic crisis, equity has continued to receive policy attention as countries seek knowledge workers and social cohesion to address the challenges of economic recovery, global competition and growing socioeconomic disadvantage (Gale & Hodge, 2014; Kift et al., 2021). In Australia, the United Kingdom, South Africa and several European nations, social and economic policy have been aligned to expand and increase undergraduate numbers (Macqueen et al., 2023; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2022).

In practice, equity in higher education involves widening participation to people who have traditionally been excluded or under-represented such as women, LGBTQ2SIA+², ethnic minorities, Indigenous groups, and people with low socioeconomic status, disabilities or who are rural and remote, and others (Crawford, 2022). While equity cohorts are not homogenous, they are often reduced to a single group, such as non-traditional in Australia and working class in the UK, or, more generally, as disadvantaged students (Macqueen et al., 2023; O'Shea et al., 2016). The use of groups and labels creates tensions and potential challenges for the attainment of educational equity. Labeled students are visible and, therefore, easier to target for support but in the process may become stigmatized (Devlin, 2013). If grouped together, stigmatization can be somewhat avoided, however, in being made invisible, it is difficult to understand the nuances of intersecting identities and to appropriately meet needs (Richardson et al., 2020). In reality, institutions need to know their students and hear from them to understand their needs, plus they need identifying data to make critical assessments of equity strategies (Devlin et al., 2012; Hughes, 2015). In this paper, the authors have chosen to use the term 'equity-deserving' to describe excluded, marginalized, and underrepresented students, and the rationale for this is discussed in the section on the importance of language.

Sector specific values such as excellence, efficiency, and merit further challenge the attainment of educational equity as they can run counter to the justice and fairness elements of social equity (Burke, 2020; Gale & Hodge, 2014). While the identification of equity-deserving students, for example, is an

² The acronym LGBTQ2SIA+ is a term that encompasses multiple identities and sexual orientations including Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Two-Spirit, Intersex and Asexual and the plus sign ("+") recognizes there are myriad ways to describe gender identities and sexual orientations. Authors of this paper use this version of the acronym throughout the paper, but acknowledge there are some variations, for example, in Canada the term begins with "2S", recognizing Two-Spirit Indigenous people as the first members of this community (Women and Gender Equality Canada, 2023).

efficient way for institutions to differentiate need and allocate resources, it is criticized for problematizing students as opposed to institutional structures, policies, and practices that create barriers and reproduce inequalities (Burke, 2020; Devlin, 2013; Larkin et al., 2014). Under scrutiny is a remedial framework approach that dominates equity in higher education, where the equity-deserving student has a 'deficit' (i.e., aspiration, capability) that needs to be 'fixed' via compensatory interventions so they can meet the 'standard of excellence' required by the elite university (Burke, 2020; Hughes, 2015; O'Shea et al., 2016). Here the onus is on the student to change to make the most of the opportunity provided so they can participate in the economy (Bonanno, 2017; Devlin et al., 2012; Hughes, 2015).

More recently, the discourse of inclusion has, in part, been mobilized to provide a way to engage with student diversity (see, e.g., AdvanceHE, 2023; Ainscow, 2020; Hockings, 2010; Larkin et al., 2014; Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021). In relation to pedagogy, inclusion is framed as a way to address diverse needs and educational justice (Ajjawi et al., 2022; Hockings, 2010). Translating inclusion into practice is not straightforward, however, with part of the complexity related to how difference is treated (Norwich, 2023; Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021). Inclusive pedagogies accept there is learner variability (Hockings, 2010; Rao et al., 2023), and learner needs are thought about as either unique to or common amongst learners that creates tensions in how to treat learners (Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021). One option is to target unique difference/s, thereby appreciating it and making it visible to ensure opportunities are not lost (Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021). The risk is that this approach stigmatizes the student (Devlin, 2013; Grier-Reed & Williams-Wengerd, 2018). Another option is to treat everyone the same, or as close as possible, to avoid stigmatizing thus making difference common and invisible (Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021). A common inclusive approach to pedagogy widely promoted is Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Meyer et al., 2014). UDL claims the needs of all learners can be met when pedagogy is informed by three guiding principles: multiple means of representation, multiple means of action and expression, and multiple means of engagement (CAST, 2018; Rao et al., 2023). Critics suggest, however, that UDL oversimplifies the differences between students, and is both unrealistic and impractical as it cannot cater to the needs of all students since accommodations will always be required for some (Norwich, 2023; Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021). Importantly, the creators of the UDL framework and guiding principles recognize that the 'project' of UDL is ongoing and a review of the guidelines with a focus on equity is currently underway (CAST, 2020; Rose et al., 2021).

It is reasoned that for higher education to be genuinely equitable, space for difference needs to be made or claimed so students feel they are included and belong (Burke, 2020; Dei, 2008). For some, this involves the expansion of the episteme with Indigenous knowledge and multiple cultures, collaborative/participatory research and decision making along with more student-centered approaches to all aspects of university life (Connell, 2019; Dei, 2008; Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). Others suggest a capabilities approach to empower equity-deserving students to challenge the structures and beliefs that perpetuate disadvantage so they can affect their own futures on their own terms both in and outside the academy (hooks, 1994; Sellar & Gale, 2011; Sen, 2009; Tikly & Barrett, 2011). Other articulations of equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) argue for a restorative justice approach that draws on post- and anti-coloniality discourses to discredit, disrupt, resist and/or dismantle the dominant structures, cultures and practices of the institution (see, e.g., Bhambra et al., 2018; Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Hall et al., 2023). It is argued that, at minimum, changes to institutional culture are required to attract and retain all students (Connell, 2019; Tight, 2020; Zepke & Leach, 2005).

Equity in Work-Integrated Learning

Equity in WIL starts from a position that argues all students should be able to participate in WIL so that the private and public benefits of this pedagogical strategy can be maximized (ACEN, 2015; Jackson et al., 2023). Equity in WIL was first identified as a problem several decades ago when it became evident that not all students had easy or equal access to WIL placements/internships, and that equity-deserving students were most impacted (Orrell, 2011; Patrick et al., 2008). Affected students are reported to include international students (Felton & Harrison, 2017; Tran & Soejatminah, 2017), female students (Ademuyiwa et al., 2023; Arthur & Guy, 2020), students with disabilities (Dollinger et al., 2023; Gatto et al., 2021), LGBTQ2SIA+ students (Mallozzi & Drewery, 2019; Messinger, 2020), Black, Indigenous, and Racialized (BIR) students (Keen & Eady, 2022; Lake, 2021), first-generation students (Ashman et al., 2021; Johnston et al., 2016), regional and remote students (Ashman et al., 2021; Fowler et al., 2018), and students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds (Hora et al., 2020; Stirling et al., 2021).

Further, there is awareness of intersecting identities and circumstances that complicate engagement with WIL. For example, Indigenous students with financial and/or family responsibilities engaging in Eurocentric/colonial structures (Nielsen et al., 2022), women with disabilities studying/working in developing economies (Mogali & Nguyen, 2022), students from low socioeconomic backgrounds or those with caring responsibilities who have to undertake a large number of mandatory placement hours (Harrison & Felton, 2013; Hoskyn et al., 2020; Johnston et al., 2016; Peach et al., 2015), those who are first-in-family to attend higher education, and are located regionally (Ashman et al., 2021).

University staff, universities more broadly, and peak bodies (e.g., Australian Collaborative Education Network [ACEN] and World Association for Cooperative Education [WACE]) all engage in a range of strategies to address equity in WIL such as advocacy and awareness raising, student scholarships, funded research, and policy and pedagogical responses along with resources in the form of principles and guidelines (Campbell & Pretti, 2023; Campbell et al., 2019; Goldman et al., 2023; Mackaway, 2022a; Mackaway & Chalkley, 2022; Peach et al., 2015). Indeed, in the last five years alone, approximately 20% of papers in the *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning* (IJWIL) have included some elements of equity, diversity, and inclusion (Ademuyiwa et al., in press). Despite these endeavors, attaining equity remains a challenge that requires greater awareness and support from all stakeholders (Dollinger et al., 2023; Jackson et al., 2023; Peach et al., 2015), with the WIL community recognizing that equity, diversity, and inclusion was their most significant professional development need (Zegwaard et al., 2022). These challenges are echoed by authors in this Special Issue.

Equity in WIL centers largely on practical, actionable strategies that address barriers with a significant focus on pedagogy. Barriers common to many students such as social capital limitations, cost, and geographical location have led to innovative models. Online placements and projects (i.e., where the students/teams are connected virtually and work remotely) are on the rise as they offer scalability and flexibility, making WIL accessible to more students (Dean et al., 2020; Kay et al., 2019; Perkins & Irwin, 2023; Rook & Dean, 2023; Zegwaard & Pretti, 2023; Zegwaard et al., 2020). While early research into these models indicated skill acquisition comparable to in-person experiences and that the flexibility benefits some equity-deserving students, more research is needed to better understand their efficacy in meeting the unique needs of equity-deserving students (Bayerlein et al., 2022; Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018; Bell et al., 2021; Jeske & Linehan, 2020; Pretti et al., 2020).

Strengths-based student centered approaches including UDL and student involvement in the design of WIL are advocated as important ways to shift the 'deficit' paradigm, give voice to equity-deserving

students and support models of WIL that meet needs of specific cohorts of students (Dollinger et al., 2023; Goldman et al., 2023; Keen & Eady, 2022; Ruskin & Bilous, 2020). Targeted equity strategies also feature with some framed as capacity building. For example, international students are offered preparatory support with resumes and help finding placements, while specialist third party providers are used to place students with a disability in organizations keen to employ disabled people (Mackaway & Chalkley, 2022). More recently, calls to move away from Western models of WIL in non-Western contexts and advocacy for Indigenous WIL come in response to the need for more culturally relevant WIL (Eady et al., 2022; Keen & Eady, 2022; Zegwaard, 2019). Scholars argue cultural contextual relevance of WIL and context-sensitive approach to WIL needs to be considered at all levels (micro, mezzo, and macro) (Rose, 2023). Many of these efforts suggest WIL must account for student dignity, wellbeing, and physical and cultural safety, along with strategies that foster belonging (Dollinger et al., 2023; Hay & Fleming, 2021; Keen & Eady, 2022; Rowe et al., 2022; Rowe et al., 2021), ideas that are grounded in many of the ideals of inclusion.

The inclusion discourse is mobilized within the WIL community to promote equity and, in places, is linked to a social justice rationale (see, e.g., Lasrado et al., 2023). There is a risk, however, that if these efforts and approaches are undertheorized, or do not involve relevant stakeholders in their design, they can be embedded with biases and assumptions that do not challenge structural barriers and reproduce inequalities in both WIL and work settings (Lasrado et al., 2023; Palmer et al., 2018). Nevertheless, engagement with the inclusion discourse can be useful when communicating with industry partners as it provides a language common to both stakeholders and may help establish a shared understanding about legal obligations, the value of equity and inclusion more broadly, understanding equity-deserving learners needs, and challenge notions of the 'ideal intern' (Dollinger et al., 2023; Mackaway & Winchester-Seeto, 2018). It may also provide a framework for universities to vet organizations to ensure they reflect and support inclusion values (Dollinger et al., 2023; Peach et al., 2015). Workplace supervisors often want to work inclusively with students, but are unsure about how to do so (Mackaway, 2022b; Mackaway & Winchester-Seeto, 2018). Indeed, research suggests employers and workplace supervisors feel underprepared to support equity-deserving students across a number of areas including legal obligations, disclosure and accommodations (Botham & Nicholson, 2014; Cukier et al., 2018; Gair et al., 2015). It is suggested that employer perspectives on fair and just access and participation in WIL be better understood and solutions co-designed (Lasrado et al., 2023).

Authors' Positionality

The authors acknowledge their positionality. The authors are European and Jewish, from low socioeconomic backgrounds, now educated and employed, cisgender, do not have obvious disabilities, and currently in positions commonly regarded as privileged. The authors live in three different economically successful English-speaking countries, two having migrated, and one with English as a second language. We acknowledge that each of these countries are built on the lands of Indigenous people that came before us. Each of the three respective countries openly discuss inequities, experience inequities, and have some (but not enough) structures to address inequities. We acknowledge we are products of our backgrounds and systems that have shaped and educated us. Based on these experiences, we can have conscious and unconscious prejudices and biases that can come through our work despite our attempts to avoid so. We acknowledge we are writing into a space whilst largely positioned out of that space and, therefore, rely on the relevant literature and lived experiences of us and others to inform our discussion and avoid drawing from our biases. It is our intent and desire that our work, with its limitations, will help advance equity within WIL.

SPECIAL ISSUE ON EQUITY, ACCESS AND INCLUSION

Since genuine inclusion requires the changing of existing norms and structures and more pluralistic values frameworks, there is a need to revisit our collective and individual assumptions, values and approaches (Ferdman, 2017). This has begun, with more critical examinations of WIL policy and practices emerging as evidenced in the IJWIL Special Issue on Indigenous Perspectives and Partnerships (2022, Volume 23, Issue 2) and the paper by MacKay et al. (2024) in this current Special Issue. These examples call on the WIL community to disrupt embedded assumptions and biases in WIL theorizing and practice through critical engagement with relevant concepts. These concepts center on social justice, [anti]oppression, post-colonialism, racism, and discrimination to better understand what is meant by diversity, equity, access, and inclusion and how this looks in practice for all WIL stakeholders.

This IJWIL Special Issue on equity, access, and inclusion is timely and contributes to this journey. The articles within the Special Issue reflect our genuine attempt to seek representation from a range of countries, disciplines, author identities, and lived experiences. In our positionality statement, we spoke about privilege. It has also been a true privilege to bring these authors in dialogue with one another here in this important Special Issue. There are common themes arising across the articles, such as language and barriers, and also separate themes arising from articles exploring similar topics. These are discussed below within their respective themes.

Importance of Language

While language is always an important consideration for an international journal, it is of particular importance for a Special Issue on equity, access, and inclusion, and unsurprisingly, is mentioned in each of the Special Issue articles. Terms vary widely amongst jurisdictions, and language has been changed and reclaimed. 'Equity-seeking' is a widely used term (Godden & Hoessler, 2024) to identify groups who have been systematically excluded. Recently, authors (Khan et al., 2024; MacKay et al., 2024) have begun to use the term 'equity-deserving' to shift the focus of equity as a right and remove the burden of seeking it (Tettey, 2019).

Many authors in this Special Issue have offered additional context of the terms they have chosen and why. For example, Rao et al. (2024) highlighted that there is not an agreed-upon definition of inclusion or access that spans the contexts of WIL. Hay and Fleming (2024) offer a nuanced discussion of defining inclusion in WIL, taking into consideration the contexts of both higher education and workplaces. In defining inclusion, scholars (e.g., Ainscow, 2005; Hockings, 2010) emphasize the removal of barriers to increase accessibility to all. However, inclusion is a contested term and it has been argued that terms like diversity and inclusion can actually perpetuate injustice (Joshi, 2014; Steinmetz, 2021).

There are various norms and conventions for identifying both disability and Queer communities across jurisdictions. For example, while the term LGBTQ2SIA+ is common in many countries, some authors from Canada (e.g., Godden & Hoessler, 2024; Khan et al., 2024) begin the term with "2S", recognizing Two-Spirit Indigenous people as the first members of this community (Women and Gender Equality Canada, 2023). In the disability space, authors have also made careful decisions about language. Lawlis et al. (2024) use the term 'students with disability' with 'disability' used as an uncountable noun, which is person-first language customary in Australia. Boye (2024) notes that person-first language is the more generally preferred language of his own community and the broader literate, but states that some communities like the Autistic and Deaf communities prefer identity-first language. Stabenow and Anderson (2024) have chosen to use both person-first "students with disabilities" and identity-first

language “disabled student” but recommend asking people about their preferences and using that language. It is particularly interesting to see authors in discourse here in this Special Issue, where readers can explore the various contextual considerations of these universal topics.

Barriers to Equity in Work-Integrated Learning

Barriers that students encounter was another theme across the articles in the Special Issue. While institutional and governmental initiatives across the globe have led to increased access to higher education for equity-deserving students, there is still inequitable access to higher education and the labor market for many equity-deserving groups (Holman et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2018; Pidgeon, 2016; Zarifa et al., 2015). Examples of barriers that equity-deserving groups might face include accessing opportunities, discriminatory hiring processes, selection bias, exclusion, tokenization, micro-aggressions, retention, anticipated concerns about discrimination or harassment in the workplace, hostile legal structures, hostile cultural or social contexts of other countries for international WIL, sexual harassment, and violence in the workplace (Bowen, 2019; Dollinger et al., 2023; Mackaway & Chalkley, 2022; Mackaway & Winchester-Seeto, 2018; Messinger, 2020; Pidgeon, 2016; Stirling et al., 2021).

WIL has been portrayed as a potential antidote, largely due to its success in preparing students for their careers. However, recent research on equity, access, and inclusion within WIL has shown that WIL itself is not immune to equity issues. For example, equity-deserving students are less likely to participate in WIL (Jackson et al., 2023) and not all students experience the benefits of WIL to the same extent (Bell et al., 2021; Itano-Boase et al., 2021; Pham et al., 2018), thereby exacerbating issues of equity and access (Adams & Jones, 2022).

Each article in the Special Issue shares evidence of barriers to WIL across populations. Some authors (Godden & Hoessler, 2024; Hay & Fleming, 2024; Khan et al., 2024; MacKay et al., 2024; Rao et al., 2024) report broadly on the range of equity-deserving groups who experience barriers. Jackson et al.’s (2023) recent cited research on over 150,000 graduates provides compelling evidence that access to WIL is not uniform. Khan et al.’s (2024) work exploring barriers experienced by equity-deserving students in a cooperative program found that some barriers are common across equity-deserving groups, while others are specific to particular populations. The authors ultimately found that students from equity-deserving groups experience both structural (e.g., policies and practices) and non-structural barriers (e.g., internalized discrimination).

Accessibility emerged as a prominent theme in the Special Issue, with a number of authors (Boye, 2024; Joseph & Winberg, 2024; Lawlis et al., 2024; Melis-De Lamper & Benner, 2024; Stabenow & Anderson, 2024) detailing the barriers experienced specifically by students with disabilities. In Canada, 22% of Canadians reported living with a disability (Morris et al., 2018). This makes Gatto et al.’s (2021) research particularly elucidating in this regard; they found that half of the students with disabilities opted out of WIL because of their disability and that students with mental health disabilities are 33% less likely to undertake WIL (Gatto et al., 2021).

The theme of barriers for LGBTQ2SIA+ began to emerge, in particular in Sengstock and Maria’s (2024) article. Sengstock is one of several authors within the Special Issue who draw upon the concept of intersectionality to describe the multiple identities that students may hold which can have the effect of layering barriers. Intersectionality was introduced by Crenshaw (1989) to explain how overlapping social identities (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation) interlock and intersect with multiple axes of oppression (e.g., sexism, racism, homophobia) to form different meanings and experiences beyond the experiences of a single identity (Warner, 2008).

Disclosure Considerations

WIL is a learning experience where a student undertakes tasks alongside an established practitioner and through peripheral participation becomes an established member of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). However, becoming a legitimate member of a community of practice includes aspects beyond practice and requires acceptance of the person as they are. Yet research shows students are hesitant to declare aspects of their identity, like sexuality or disability, in fear of being discriminated against or perceived as less worthy, impacting the extent they are truly accepted into the community of practice or the extent they can participate within that community (Dollinger et al., 2023; Sengstock & Maria, 2024).

Sengstock and Maria (2024) present research on LGBTQ2SIA+ student experiences in a hypermasculine work setting. They found that LGBTQ2SIA+ students feared for their personal safety (9%), being stereotyped (22%), and discrimination (17%). While half of the participants disclosed their sexuality to those in the workplace, often in a casual way, the other half did not disclose primarily because they thought it was 'none of their business' but also out of fear of discrimination. Sengstock and Maria (2024) continue to advocate for inclusive organizations by considering work environments (e.g., gender-neutral restrooms) and creating awareness through cultural competency training, support groups, inclusive policy, and workplace cultural shifts, in particular of workplaces that tend to be hypermasculine.

Khan et al.'s (2024) findings are consistent with Sengstock and Maria's, where LGBTQ2SIA+ students hesitated to disclose their identity, thinking carefully about how they might answer a question about what they did on the weekend because they knew some of their peers were homophobic. Khan et al. (2024) also found that students with disabilities were hesitant to disclose because it could affect their job prospects or their relationships with both employers and co-workers. The authors share a powerful quote from a participant drawing on their lived experiences of people losing respect for them and treating them differently after they disclosed a disability. Sadly, these experiences are consistent with the literature, and there is evidence that students' concern about disclosing a disability because it might limit WIL opportunities, conversely, can result in them self-excluding from WIL opportunities (Gatto et al., 2021; Itano-Boase et al., 2021).

Stabenow and Anderson (2024) provide a thorough exploration of disability, including its definition and various models, the compounding effects of intersectionality and human rights, followed by a presentation of Canadian data indicating that 59% of people with disabilities are unemployed. The authors explain the most common barriers to participation include stigma and attitudinal perceptions where people with disabilities are perceived as less capable, reliable, and productive, which impacts decisions around recruitment and retention. Stabenow and Anderson (2024) discuss the reasons that students choose not to disclose disabilities and suggest that WIL may be a unique opportunity to practice disclosure to learn more about which accommodations may be most useful as they transition to the workforce. Stabenow and Anderson (2024) propose an outline for a transparent and collaborative accommodations process that commences with the student disclosing disabilities.

The right to not be discriminated against and the right to not disclose a disability is enshrined in law, for example, the Australian Disability Discrimination Act ("Australian Government, Disability Discrimination Act," 1992). Stabenow and Anderson (2024) also provide insight into Canadian legislation. These laws, however, include the condition that when a disability impacts the inherent requirements of the job or impacts the safety of others, disclosure of the disability to the employer is

required. This may result in the person being treated differently, including being excluded, but only after the employer has considered reasonable adjustments that do not cause unjustifiable hardship. This is described as an exception or exemption, and not discrimination (e.g., Section 21a, Australian Disability Discrimination Act 1992). Determining if and how a disability impacts the inherent requirements, what impact means, and when adjustments become unjustifiable hardships is, unfortunately, subjective and open for interpretation. This complex space highlights the need for clear and early communication of the essential requirements of the role, what accommodations will not jeopardize the safety of others, and to create collaborative spaces for these conversations to openly occur without unjustifiable discrimination. Several authors across this Special Issue discuss the importance of creating safe spaces and approaches for disclosure so that students can get the accommodations they need. When there is a hesitancy for students to disclose due to a self-held belief that they should seek/want to be treated the same, normalizing disclosure of a disability and accessing accommodations may help more students to feel conformable and safe with disclosure.

Inclusive and Accessible Workplaces

Crucial to the WIL experience is the involvement of a host organization and access to the workplace, especially for work placement models of WIL (Zegwaard et al., 2023). Workplaces need to be considered in the design and delivery of inclusive and equitable practices of WIL. Students on work placements become integrated as part of the team and engage with the norms of behaviors and the unspoken structures of the workplace, an important aspect of learning through WIL. However, not all norms of behavior and unspoken structures are inclusive, and some may (knowingly or unknowingly) discriminate against students during work placement (Bowen, 2019). Organizations are required to provide appropriate support for students while in the workplace (Winchester-Seeto et al., 2022). Some countries have introduced legal frameworks outlining the educational institution requirements for supporting student wellbeing (e.g., the Education (Pastoral Care of Tertiary and International Learners) Code of Practice, New Zealand Government, 2021), clarifying that both the host organization and the educational institution have a responsibility to ensure a safe, equitable, and non-discriminatory workplace experience.

Hay and Fleming (2024) outline the arguments for accessible and inclusive workplaces and the responsibilities within. The argument is presented through a sociocultural theory lens and describes that inclusive workplaces allow students to engage in meaningful ways with accessible and relevant experiences, where individuality and diversity are embraced. Incorporating earlier work by the authors (Fleming & Hay, 2021) on risk frameworks, an inclusive WIL workplace framework is presented. The inclusive WIL framework builds on the principles of self-determination, belonging, wellbeing, and care and respect, which are then articulated into practice points. Hay and Fleming (2024) argue that successful enactment of this framework will need to value uniqueness and safe spaces, challenge bias and discrimination, be non-judgmental, and recognize limitations.

Lawlis et al. (2024) argue that while designing inclusive WIL practices for students with disabilities requires collaboration between all stakeholders, often host organizations are not included. Lawlis et al. (2024) present research on host organizations' perceptions of offering a WIL experience to students with disclosed disabilities. Host organizations expressed willingness and understanding to provide accommodations where possible, however, this is only possible if the student discloses their disability. These organizations expressed that it was critical that students disclosed their disabilities so accommodations could be provided; not disclosing disabilities denies the host the opportunity to provide appropriate support, and they were critical of the university for not sharing this information.

However, students (in many countries) are within their legal rights to not disclose their disabilities. Many students purposefully do not disclose to avoid discrimination (Itano-Boase et al., 2021) and the university cannot disclose on behalf of the student without their permission. This tension is debated at length in the literature (Robert & Harlan, 2006). A theme emerging from Lawlis et al.'s (2023) work is using a universal approach to identifying strengths and weaknesses, where all students are asked about their strengths, weaknesses, and goals of the internship. Lawlis et al. (2023) suggest that creating safe spaces and students' subsequent trusting of supportive organizations will increase the likelihood of disclosure. This may include providing statements of inclusive practices and already established accommodations (e.g., wheelchair-friendly) early in the WIL process and in job postings.

Designing Inclusive Work-Integrated Learning Curriculum

Curricular design remains a topical challenge within the WIL literature, with discussion increasingly shifting to scaffolding of learning across the qualification (Adams & Jones, 2022). However, little attention has been given to designing WIL curriculum with inclusivity and access in mind, with attempts in the general curriculum being described as tokenization, misinterpretations, and even appropriations (Kovach, 2009; Nielsen et al., 2022; Pidgeon, 2016).

Godden and Hoessler (2024) build upon earlier work (Hoessler & Godden, 2021) that presented five design factors for enhancing WIL. These included dimensions in access, inclusion, and equity considerations, that is, social and physical context, frequency and length of the experience, level of independency and responsibility, scaffolding, and theoretical preparation. In addition to social and economic backgrounds, education has a significant influence on employment outcomes (Hosein et al., 2023). However, students from lower socioeconomic status and with English not as a first language, are academically outperformed by students from more privileged backgrounds (Li et al., 2023), indicating inclusive and equitable curricular (re)design should be a priority for higher education. Godden and Hoessler (2024) make a series of recommendations including appropriate information being shared between the external stakeholder, student, and the education institution. They emphasize expectations and requirements for accommodations, including special needs, flexibility, cultural/religious observations, and level of feedback to be provided. The authors go on to argue that workplace mentors may require professional development to allow for inclusive mentorship and to identify any unconscious biases.

Rao et al. (2024) argue for a UDL approach in the context of WIL. UDL has its roots in building design to allow accessibility for people with disabilities, and has expanded to include learning and social participation. Rao et al. (2024) rightfully point out that WIL is not experienced equally across all student cohorts. In particular, the self-sourced placement model creates significant inequities for international students, students with disabilities, first-in-family to attend university, and students from lower socioeconomic status. Rao et al. (2024) present strategies for designing inclusive WIL based on the principles of engagement, representation, action, and expression. They provide guidelines such as open and clear communication through different approaches, creating safe spaces, clear expectations, and clarifying the nuances of norms of behavior.

Melis-De Lamper and Benner (2024) present a case study on good practice of an inclusive WIL program that partners with an external organization (CanWork) to secure work placements for students. The profiled WIL program is specifically designed for students with disabilities and mental health challenges. Crucially, the program addressed a known barrier for students with equity needs by removing minimum grade point average (GPA) requirements, providing targeted upskilling, and

increasing one-on-one guidance. The program successfully improved students' confidence and their understanding of self, with students seeing the benefit of the program. It is common for WIL programs to have a minimum GPA entry requirement, which is a significant barrier for some equity-deserving groups. Interestingly, analysis of the GPAs of students in the CanWork program showed that there was no difference in the success rate of securing placements for students that would have met a minimum GPA requirement and those who would not, clearly evidencing that minimum GPA requirements for WIL programs are an unnecessary barrier.

Inclusive Assessment Approaches

Assessment is at the heart of the educational institution and has long been identified as challenging within WIL where outcomes tend to be more variable and at times even unpredictable due to the social nature of learning through WIL (Ferns & Zegwaard, 2014). The validity and reliability of assessment tools is important but difficult when students are learning in different contexts. Smith et al. (2014) articulate challenges of both how and what to assess, whilst Ferns and Zegwaard (2014) continue further to argue that it is not knowledge acquisition that should be assessed, rather assessment should focus on employability capabilities. The literature on assessment has been dominated by summative assessment approaches (Dixson & Worrell, 2016), despite arguments on the merits of formative assessment (Panadero et al., 2019). Increasingly, discussion around assessment has focused on authentic assessment approaches and with formative rather than summative design, which incorporates contextualized tasks and activities (Ferns & Zegwaard, 2014; Nieminen, 2023). Further, assessment and evaluation practices should consider and promote equity and social justice for inclusion (Tai et al., 2023).

Joseph and Winberg (2024) researched perceptions of first year students with disabilities who had experienced practical preparation for work-readiness. The findings support the case that formative assessment is essential for career preparedness and is likely to be more easily adjusted to be inclusive than summative assessment. Their analysis of the literature resulted in a framework of formative assessment that includes dimensions of student engagement, feedback, metacognition, authenticity, flexibility, reflection on practice, and the building of confidence, creativity, and critical thinking. Joseph and Winberg (2024) proceed to explain that employing inclusive formative assessment practices with students with disabilities allowed them to redesign assessment approaches, concluding these assessments would be useful beyond students with disabilities.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Critical Reflection to Disrupt Systems of Oppression

Reflection is commonly believed to be an essential element of WIL (Helyer, 2015) and has been recognized as a marker of quality WIL frameworks around the world (Campbell & Pretti, 2023; McRae et al., 2021; Winchester-Seeto, 2019). While there are many definitions of and approaches to reflection, Zegwaard et al. (2017) emphasize the importance of examining our positionality within systems. In this Special Issue, MacKay et al. (2024) position critical reflection as an important tool in disrupting systems of oppression. For example, in Bowen's (2019) study of students encountering gender bias in the workplace, she suggests that classrooms might provide a space for students to reflect on problematic gendered structures. MacKay and colleagues provide practical examples of how critical reflection might be employed to prompt students to think beyond what they are seeing in the workplace. While there is ongoing emphasis on reflection for students, MacKay et al. (2024) also recommend reflection for WIL educators to unpack their values, beliefs and biases. They share several

tools and examples of what this work might look like for educators, including a social identity reflexive mapping tool from Jacobson and Mustafa (2019), which progresses educators through three tiers of reflection to guide them through understanding their own positionality.

Partnering with Students

Partnering with students as co-creators in their own learning is an important way to provide voice to students and enhance their engagement, motivation, meta-cognition, and the development of skills useful to their future employment (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2014), and this extends to WIL (Ruskin & Bilous, 2020). Ruskin and Bilous (2020) suggest students can act in various roles that are not mutually exclusive and include: as planners where they develop learning contracts and research plans; as contributors where they share relevant readings and materials with their peers; as creators where they produce resources based on what they have learned; and, as reviewers where they provide feedback on course materials. Further, it is acknowledged that partnering with students provides the opportunity to give voice to equity-deserving students and gain deeper insights into the challenges faced by specific groups, such as students with disabilities, and for these groups to lead ideas on inclusive and equitable policies and practices (Bovill et al., 2016; Dollinger et al., 2023). Importantly, research in this area reminds academics of the power imbalances between faculty, students and staff, and makes recommendations for time and effort to be devoted to finding meaningful and useful approaches to student collaboration (Bovill et al., 2016; Seale et al., 2015). In this Special Issue, Boye (2024) shares a model of working with students that involves participatory research, yarning, and design thinking. This approach saw multiple benefits including student-led recommendations to address equity issues for students with disabilities as well as providing a place to connect students and build a supportive community.

Student Resilience

As equitable practices receive increased attention, it is important to also consider the related area of student resilience. Resilience is an under-researched theme in the WIL literature (Zegwaard & Rowe, 2019) but has been identified as a growing challenge for young people for some time (Hattie et al., 1996; Waxman et al., 2003), including students in higher education (Forbes-Mewett, 2019). In the UK, it was reported that 70% of higher education students were concerned about their wellbeing (Office for Students, 2021), which was in part influenced by the COVID-19 context (Konstantinou et al., 2023). Often students who struggle most with wellbeing are those who experience additional barriers and/or are from equity-deserving groups (Goldman et al., 2023).

The discourses of wellness and resilience in higher education have been criticized for their emphasis on pressuring students to reframe negative experiences while doing little to address inequities (Aubrecht, 2012). The emphasis on resilience can have the effect of making structural and systemic problems in higher education the responsibility of individual students to overcome. While there is a responsibility to remove barriers and ensure WIL becomes more equitable, there is an equal responsibility to prepare students to be resilient in life beyond their WIL experiences, which includes what they might do when they encounter discrimination or barriers in workplaces (Drysdale et al., 2022). For example, MacKay et al. (2024) recommend anti-oppression training to help students navigate biases in the workplace. Importantly, these approaches are relevant for all students, as they have the effect of promoting allyship and ethical action (Campbell & Zegwaard, 2015).

FUTURE RESEARCH

It is important to acknowledge the key challenges of equity and access research in WIL. The academy has a problematic history of treating equity-deserving groups as ‘petri dishes’ and conducting research ‘on’ instead of ‘with’ these groups (Altermark, 2017). Similarly, deficit-based models can be difficult to spot as they may have been developed with good intentions to help those in-need instead of removing systemic barriers that have prevented equity-deserving groups from accessing opportunities. It is likely that many scholars had the best intentions, therefore, it can be formidable as researchers to change the way we work for fear of making mistakes. Furthermore, researchers’ privileging of certain ways of knowing has come into question within equity movements. For example, Simpson (2011) highlights the persistent lack of recognition of Indigenous intellectual traditions across disciplines. Making space for ways of knowing outside the conventional research paradigm is particularly relevant to WIL, which is grounded in the concept of seeking wisdom beyond the academy. Representation is an ongoing issue in equity research. There are movements to create space for lived experiences while also avoiding tokenizing or requiring researchers to self-disclose elements of their identities, especially if they do not feel safe to do so.

Ultimately, even though equity is a common underlying thread in WIL literature (Ademuyiwa et al., in press), significant gaps remain, providing immediate research needs, such as:

- More clearly identifying a research agenda that includes greater representation of equity-deserving groups in WIL and developing research ‘with’ and not ‘on’ these groups.
- Investigating more deeply where and how students are systematically excluded from WIL.
- Developing a better understanding of how to create safe spaces for WIL students to disclose, and identifying what supports students when deciding if disclosure is in their interest.
- Recognizing and researching the complexity of the intersectional identities of students within a WIL context.
- Examining WIL faculty, staff, student, and employer attitudes, understanding, and expectations of equity.
- Proposing research-informed guidelines for when to use a UDL approach or an individual approach to addressing equity.
- Investigating how to better maintain support for WIL students as they move into off-campus WIL spaces.
- Evaluating equity in WIL, tracking progress, and finding gaps in understanding.

CONCLUSION

The topic of equity, access, and inclusion can be challenging for researchers and practitioners to explore, particularly for an international publication where there are not consistent definitions of these concepts, and jurisdictions vary in their conceptualizations and practices. The articles within the Special Issue reflect a range of theoretical and empirical work, author identities, disciplines, lived experiences, and countries (primarily English-speaking). While some work has been focused on specific populations, other articles have more broadly examined issues of equity, access, and inclusion across a range of equity-deserving groups. Articles in the Special Issues are grounded in various conceptual frameworks and while this diversity is a challenge when compiling a Special Issue, it is also a strength. Equity research in WIL may be conducted within, against, and beyond systems, with the most radical asserting that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde, 1984, p. 112). Ultimately, since WIL provides students with significant positive outcomes, including essential preparation for future

work (Jackson & Cook, 2023), all approaches are crucial. Equity research in WIL can be daunting but the field requires urgent attention. We recognize that as the field continues to change, research, adjusting curriculum, and changing practice will not occur without some mistakes and that is part of the journey. We recommend the approach advocated by Maya Angelou (McGraw, 1999), an American poet and civil rights activist, that as WIL researchers and practitioners, we do the best we can until we know better, and when we know better, we do better.

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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, entrepreneurship, 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), and the University of Waikato, New Zealand, and receives periodic sponsorship from the Australian Collaborative Education Network (ACEN), University of Waterloo, and the World Association of Cooperative Education (WACE).

Types of Manuscripts Sought by the Journal

Types of manuscripts sought by IJWIL is of 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 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.

*Zegwaard, K. E., Pretti, T. J., Rowe, A. D., & Ferns, S. J. (2023). Defining work-integrated learning. In K. E. Zegwaard & T. J. Pretti (Eds.), *The Routledge international handbook of work-integrated learning* (3rd ed., pp. 29-48). Routledge.



International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning

ISSN: 2538-1032

www.ijwil.org

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Publisher: Work-Integrated Learning New Zealand (WILNZ)

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