Chapter 5
Australia’s National Work–Integrated Learning Strategy in University Education: Challenges and Opportunities

Berwyn Clayton
Victoria University, Australia

Hugh B. Guthrie
The University of Melbourne, Australia

ABSTRACT
This chapter describes how the development of work-integrated learning (WIL) has become an increasingly important component of both curriculum and pedagogy across a wide range of disciplines in Australia’s universities. This has been driven by institutions reacting to government and industry demands for work-relevant degrees and work-ready graduates. The chapter analyzes five of the eight action areas in the National WIL Strategy. A number of barriers to further implementation are identified and discussed, including funding, institutional constraints, assessment challenges, and employer capacity, particularly in smaller companies. Ways forward include developing quality information and the resources to support implementation, growing champions of the process in institutions and employers, and developing alternative approaches to delivery given the pressure placed on industry for work placements by all sectors of Australian education.

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INTRODUCTION

The world of work has become a key area for consideration in curriculum development and delivery across Australia’s educational sectors. Increasing participation in vocational education by secondary school students, a strong apprenticeship system and sustained growth in vocational education has been accompanied by a growing commitment by universities to offer students Work Integrated Learning (WIL) opportunities within their degree programs. This has involved developing curriculum which integrates theory with authentic activities that directly reflect professional practice. Work placements, internships and industry projects are well established approaches in disciplines that have direct links to occupations such as engineering, education and medicine. Now a range of newer vocational disciplines as well as those not considered to have strong vocational links (such as Bachelor of Arts degrees) are working actively to establish WIL options and opportunities for students undertaking higher education qualifications.

WIL has increased significantly in many of Australia’s thirty seven public universities over the last ten years. As the chapter will demonstrate, this growth has largely been driven by institutions reacting to government and industry demands for work-relevant degrees and work-ready graduates. Universities have responded by establishing partnerships with businesses and have developed innovative policies, models and information in support of WIL. While a number of institutions have adopted a university-wide approach to the implementation of WIL, others have taken a discipline-based approach with individual academics and teaching teams taking responsibility for the administration of WIL. Nevertheless, there have been issues in implementing such approaches, which this chapter will highlight.

WIL practitioners have also been influential in encouraging universities and academics to integrate theory with authentic work practice. The Australian Collaborative Education Network (ACEN), established in 2006, has played a pivotal role in supporting the growth of WIL amongst its university members by initiating research, scholarships, conferences and disseminating information on WIL. ACEN has also played a significant advocacy role, working closely with peak industry bodies and Universities Australia in the formulation of a framework for future collaborative action around aspects of WIL.

The National Strategy on Work Integrated Learning in University Education was launched in 2015 (Universities Australia, Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Australian Industry Group, Business Council of Australia & Australian Collaborative Education Network 2015). Viewed as a facilitative mechanism, the Strategy is aimed at expanding opportunities for universities, employers, students and other stakeholders to work together to build workforce capability. The Strategy
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