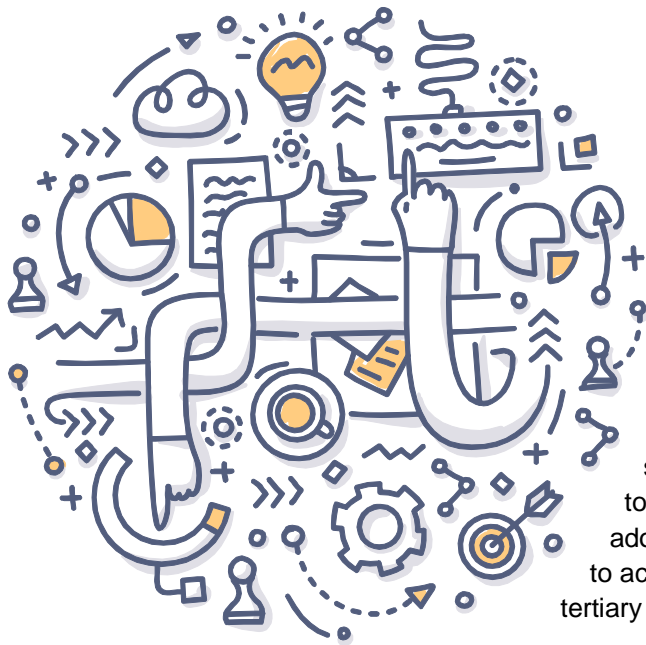




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Executive Summary

Australian universities are under increasing pressure to support students to develop the graduate skills and knowledge required to transition from education into professional practice. The adoption of a range of work integrated learning (WIL) approaches to achieve this aim represents an increasingly prevalent part of the tertiary education landscape.

However, successes in increasing the participation of diverse groups in higher education challenge assumptions regarding students' extra-study commitments and the potential impacts of these on students' capacity to participate in WIL activities, particularly unpaid placements. Despite these shifts, there has been limited exploration of student experiences of WIL through a wellbeing lens or with an explicit focus on the equity considerations.

Through the voices and experiences of WIL administrators and participants from the disciplines of health and social services, education, and nursing, this research identifies the personal impacts of participation in WIL beyond the impacts of professional development and in-situ learning. This research explores personal and other factors influencing students' experiences of WIL placements and their coping strategies for managing the reciprocal impacts of participation in other commitments. Examining the equity implications of WIL participation, this research reveals new insights about participant experiences and has the potential to inform WIL policies and practices to support student wellbeing.

In connecting WIL and wellbeing, we introduce the concept of *WIL wellbeing* as a construct to identify the impacts of WIL on participants' wellbeing within and beyond the learning context. Explicitly connecting WIL and wellbeing, and foregrounding the everyday life experiences of WIL participants, we highlight the contribution of personal coping strategies (many of which are taken into post-graduation professional practice) to managing a successful WIL experience. In the context of the broad scale adoption of WIL as a learning pedagogy, this research also considers how universities and WIL placement workplaces can better support students in preparation for and during their WIL experiences.

Key Findings

WIL Participants Experience Considerable Levels of Financial Stress

WIL participants experience multiple and connected stresses as a result of undertaking a WIL placement. These stresses are experienced due to a combination of the intensive unpaid nature of WIL placements, the additional costs incurred as a result of the placement, relational stressors and the financial impacts of lost wages. This research finds that the financial stress experienced as a result of WIL participation is not discriminatory, and that a concerning number of WIL participants forgo necessities, including food, when undertaking WIL due to financial reasons. Many WIL participants, particularly those with paid employment and/or caring responsibilities, experience significant role conflict as a result of WIL participation and are faced with additional challenges and complexities. Research participants, regardless of their familial or employment circumstances, suggest that additional financial assistance and support is required by many WIL participants to support their participation.

WIL Workplaces Need Better Preparation and Support to Positively Contribute to Participant Wellbeing and Learning Outcomes

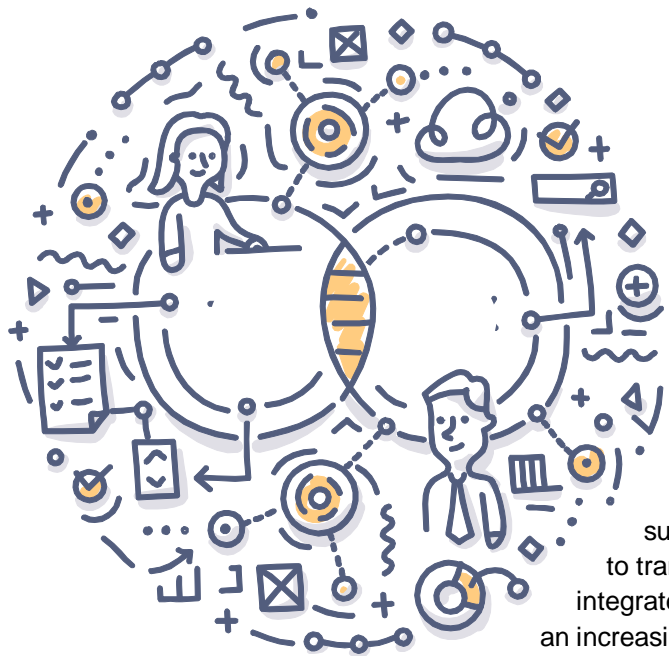
Both WIL administrators and student participants in this research identified the impact of attitudes and behaviours of supervisors, co-workers and clients within the WIL workplace on student wellbeing. They conclude that better training, support and vetting of potential WIL workplaces and supervisors is required. An improved triadic relationship between university–WIL and workplace–student is required which centres student learning and is cognisant of the needs of and challenges faced by students in an equitable way, that still allows them to develop their experience and understandings of their intended profession.

Greater Levels of Institutional and Community Support are Required to Support WIL Participant Wellbeing

In addition to more supportive supervisory relationships within the WIL workplace, WIL participants are seeking greater levels of pastoral care, staff support and empathy from universities. Both WIL administrators and student participants in this research proposed that universities and registration/accreditation bodies need to consider alternatives to unpaid WIL placements or structural changes to placement requirements which limit extended unpaid placements. Combined, peer, family, community and university support make an important contribution to a successful WIL experience, however, available institutional support and eligibility requirements need to be better communicated to students, particularly those that may not have existing support networks.

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1. Connecting Work Integrated Learning and Participant Wellbeing

Australian universities are under increasing pressure to support graduates to develop the skills and knowledge required to transition from higher education into professional practice. Work integrated learning (WIL), often in the form of practicum placements, is an increasingly common approach to providing students with exposure to professional workplaces and the opportunity to apply theoretical and practical

learning within a workplace context (Atkinson 2016; Universities Australia 2014). WIL participation can range from short-term work experiences and shadowing, through to extended work placements that last for many weeks. In their report for the Australian Fair Work Ombudsman, Stewart and Owens (2013) reported that an audit undertaken by an Australian university revealed that thousands of students were undertaking 121 different types of external placements. A Canadian survey found similarly widespread experiences, with 42 per cent of university students reporting having taken part in some form of education focused unpaid work (Kramer & Usher 2011).

This research is concerned with student participation in unpaid work placements which contain elements of both work and education/training for the express purpose of experiential education (Batra *et al.* 2014; Jordan-Baird 2013). Formal, educationally-focused unpaid work embedded into degree programs, in the form of practicum, is generally considered beneficial and influential (Bullough *et al.* 2002; Smith & Lev-Ari 2005) and provides valuable exposure to professional practice and learning opportunities (Coiacetto 2004; Freestone *et al.* 2006; Jackson & Wilton 2017; King 2008; Patrick *et al.* 2009). Students participating in a WIL placement are reported to undergo considerable personal changes including developing self-perception, self-efficacy (Martins *et al.* 2014), professional identity (Jackson 2016), and the ability to deal with the practical and emotional demands of their chosen profession (Kwan & Lopez-Real 2005). Many participants believe that WIL experience has a positive impact on generic critical and analytical thinking skills, improves their discipline knowledge and skills, and helps to connect classroom-learnt theory and concepts to real world applications (Bates & Bates 2013; Kramer & Usher 2011; Nagrajan 2012; Noble 2011).

Possibly as a result of reported benefits of participation, combined with the widespread student popularity of WIL across most disciplines where practicum is prevalent, research into WIL has tended to focus on improving student learning outcomes (e.g. Lawson *et al.* 2015; Pellett & Pellett 2005) or the ways graduate employability and skills are, or can be, enhanced by the experience (for example, Coiacetto 2004; Freestone *et al.* 2006; Jackson 2014, 2015; Jackson & Wilton 2017; Ryan *et al.* 1996; Universities Australia 2014). However, more critical accounts have highlighted challenges in providing WIL experiences that do not unnecessarily expose participants to unethical or questionable professional practices (Allen *et al.* 2013; Burke & Carton 2013; Curtis *et al.* 2007; Grant Bowman & Lipp 2000; Grant-Smith & McDonald 2016; Gregory 1998; Moorman 2004). Despite the increasing prevalence and popularity of WIL among educators, administrators, industry and student participants, there is a paucity of research regarding the impact of WIL participation on students from the student perspective.

There is increasing recognition that students participating in tertiary education experience higher levels of stress and distress than the general population (Stallman 2010) and that those participating in programs of study with significant practicum requirements are exposed to additional stressors which increase their risk of psychological distress (Hillis *et al.* 2010). Participating in a WIL placement is a psychologically demanding period where participants must manage multiple competing priorities and commitments; relationships with

co-workers and clients; they must adapt to new professional demands (Chapman & Orb 2001; Murray-Harvey *et al.* 2000) and develop and practice professional skills and knowledge in a new and challenging work environment (Chaplain 2008; Kyriacou & Stephens 1999) while attempting to juggle a range of academic and other commitments such as paid work and family responsibilities (Klassen & Durksen 2014). The socio-emotional, physical and economic factors that can impact on the WIL placement experience, and the impact that participation in a WIL placement can have on participants' other life domains, have been underexplored. This project examines the socio-emotional and financial dimensions of WIL participation through investigating the potential impact of participating in unpaid practicum on participant wellbeing from the perspectives of those most invested in the WIL system: WIL administrators and WIL participants.

Successes in increasing the participation of diverse groups in higher education, such as students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and non-school leavers, have challenged assumptions regarding students' extra study commitments and the impacts that these might have on access to, and participation in, WIL learning experiences such as unpaid practicum. Although participating in WIL is stressful for many participants due to the intensity of the learning experience, for some students, when combined with other commitments, the pressures associated with placement can further exacerbate the level of stress experienced (Gardner 2010). Personal factors impacting WIL experiences include financial stress, caring and familial responsibilities, cultural differences, travel requirements and transport issues, and unmet expectations (Andrews & Chong 2011; Carter *et al.* 2014; Drysdale *et al.* 2016; Forbus *et al.* 2011; Gardner 2010; Johnstone *et al.* 2016; Patrick *et al.* 2009). Personal factors are likely to be more strongly experienced by students from certain equity groups such as second career students (Beutel & Crosswell 2015), parents-as-students (Brooks 2015; Halsey 2005; Marandet & Wainright 2009; Murtagh 2015; Patrick *et al.* 2009), and students completing their placement in a country or location where the native language is different to their own (Carter *et al.* 2014; Nguyen 2014; Patrick *et al.* 2009). These personal factors can have a significant impact on an individual's participation in or completion of their WIL placement.

Although the impact of personal factors that contribute to student experience in the WIL environments are under-explored, the importance and transferability of coping and resilience strategies in supporting an individual's wellbeing is widely discussed across other contexts (Drysdale *et al.* 2016; Luthar *et al.* 2000; Mate & Ryan 2015; Zautra *et al.* 2010). The importance of incorporating effective and appropriate strategies into pedagogical and institutional practice to support the diversity of the student cohort participating in WIL has also been emphasised in recent research (Carter *et al.* 2014; Katz *et al.* 2014; Litvack *et al.* 2010; Nguyen 2014; Patrick *et al.* 2009). Meeting the needs of student cohorts with extensive external commitments and diverse educational, employment and cultural backgrounds may require the provision of access to greater levels and more focused support, and are likely to employ different coping strategies to their 'traditional' student peers (Beutel & Crosswell 2015; Forbus *et al.* 2011; Murtagh 2015).

Additional research is required to understand the specific challenges the increasingly diverse, non-traditional student base face in attempting to balance multiple work, study and life roles (Forbus *et al.* 2011; Hayden Cheng & McCarthy 2013) during periods of extended unpaid WIL. It is vital to understand these changes, as the ability to participate in WIL opportunities has the potential to shape future employment opportunities and access to graduate labour markets. This research highlights the challenges participants face balancing unpaid WIL with work, study and other commitments, the coping strategies students employ to manage these, and the institutional and other supports that could positively influence student wellbeing and equity in future WIL experiences.

WIL Wellbeing

There has been extensive research on the positive pedagogical contribution of participation in WIL and its potential to enhance graduate employability through the development of interpersonal, social and professional skills (e.g., Carter *et al.* 2014; Coiacetto 2004; Drysdale *et al.* 2016; Eljido-Ten & Kloot 2015;

Freestone *et al.* 2006; Jackson 2015; Jackson & Wilton 2016; Patrick *et al.* 2009). However, although the WIL experience is recognised as a period of intensive learning and adaptation for participants, advocate accounts have been less likely to highlight the personal factors that contribute to and potentially affect a student's experience of WIL, or the potential impact of participation in WIL on other life domains. More critical studies have highlighted the potentially negative aspects of participation in WIL activities including increased psychological and financial stress, social isolation, study/life imbalance and exposure to potentially exploitative, unsafe, unethical or unlawful work practices (Allen *et al.* 2013; Bergin & Pakenham 2015; Burke & Carton 2013; Grant-Smith & McDonald 2016; Johnstone *et al.* 2016; Maidment & Crisp 2011; Pelech *et al.* 2009). Addressing these stressors and negotiating the associated tensions has the potential to affect student wellbeing. Research suggests that the experience of participating in WIL activities and the coping strategies employed by these students to deal with the additional stress presented by participation have potential consequences for student wellbeing in terms of their physical and psychological health as well as their academic performance (Astin *et al.* 2005; Bosh 2013; Brough *et al.* 2015; Deasy *et al.* 2014; McKenna & Wellard 2004; Moore 2015; Neill & Taylor 2002).

In recent years, there has been an increasing emphasis on student wellbeing within the context of tertiary education more generally, and also to address issues identified within specific disciplines such as education, nursing, medicine and law, which typically involve high levels of WIL (Deasy *et al.* 2014; O'Brien *et al.* 2011). Wellbeing can be understood as a heterogeneous combination of an individual's physical, mental, emotional and social health. As such, wellbeing is often linked to happiness, life satisfaction and quality of life. Common to most conceptualisations of wellbeing are multiple overlapping and inter-related dimensions working together as part of a wellbeing whole. The most commonly identified dimensions of wellbeing are cognitive, economic/environmental, social, physical, psychological and sometimes spiritual (Fraillon 2004; Gillett-Swan 2014; Gillett-Swan & Sargeant 2015; La Placa *et al.* 2013; McNaught 2011; Pollard & Lee 2003; Schickler 2005).

As shown in Figure 1, the relationship between these various dimensions is often represented as a series of interlocking circles in a complex Venn or Euler arrangement. The development and maintenance of wellbeing depends not only on fluidity in all of these dimensions, but also on their increasing integration over time (Atkinson 2013). The concept of wellbeing as an accrued process has been proposed in an attempt to capture the dynamic and temporal nature of wellbeing, and the capacity for growth and change that is embodied in the lived experience of wellbeing. Gillett-Swan and Sargeant (2015, 143) define accrued wellbeing as “an individual's capacity to manage over time, the range of inputs, both constructive and undesirable that can, in isolation, affect a person's emotional, physical and cognitive state in response to a given context”. As such, an individual's accrued wellbeing has the capacity to affect and be affected by the introduction of external stressors such as participation in WIL.



Figure 1. Conceptualising wellbeing

WIL wellbeing, as a construct, recognises that wellbeing is dynamic and fluid. It goes beyond moment-in-time assessments to present a holistic representation of the protective effects that different inputs, actions and experiences may have on an individual's ability to respond to threats to their wellbeing during challenges of both an acute and chronic nature. Each dimension of wellbeing within an individual's WIL wellbeing contributes to an individual's overall experience of wellbeing. The ways that participation in WIL affects student wellbeing differs according to context, wellbeing in other life domains, and the presence of protective factors. When present, these protective factors may serve to mitigate or eliminate risk or otherwise enhance wellbeing. This potential to manage external threats on wellbeing demonstrates the importance of both an individual's capacity to identify "experiential reference points from which to take action" (Gillett-Swan & Sargeant 2015, 143) to restore equilibrium and their capacity and resources to take this action.

WIL wellbeing highlights the importance of facilitating these capacities as part of a process of accrued wellbeing in which the enhancing, multidimensional, interconnected, and capacity building nature of an individual's overall wellbeing can be further fortified. Identifying WIL wellbeing to exemplify one aspect of an individual's experience of wellbeing recognises that participation in WIL can have an enhancing or diminishing impact on accrued wellbeing. It also highlights the importance of providing supports for WIL participants at an institutional, course, workplace, and peer level.

Previous research focusing on stressors stemming from the WIL experiences has tended to focus on administrative and performance matters and the anxiety associated with being assessed or evaluated by others and by oneself (that is, self-assessed successful performance, see for example Danyluk 2013; Kokkinos & Stavropoulos 2016; Levett-Jones *et al.* 2008; Macdonald 1992; Mason 2006). There has been little research that recognises the impact of external stressors on the WIL experience; excluding a notable exception in recent research which considers the financial stress associated with participation in unpaid practicum in social work (Brough *et al.* 2015; Johnstone *et al.* 2016), education (Oram *et al.* 2014), and nursing or allied health (Lomax-Smith *et al.* 2011; Wray & McCall 2007). Interrogating WIL experiences through the lens of wellbeing can also assist academics and workplaces supervising WIL activities to better understand participant experiences and the coping strategies they employ. The construct of *WIL wellbeing* recognises the impact of WIL participation on participants' quality of life, both within and beyond the learning context. By explicitly connecting WIL experiences and accrued wellbeing in this way, this research considers the ways an individual's WIL wellbeing may be shaped and the importance of nurturing a range of individual coping strategies through formal and informal institutional support mechanisms. In linking this concept to practice, this research advocates the utility of WIL wellbeing as a framework for identifying potential risks to student wellbeing and the development of protective strategies.



2. Study Methodology

Through the voices and experiences of WIL administrators and students from the disciplines of health and social services, education, and nursing this research identifies the personal impacts of participation in WIL. It explores personal and other factors influencing students' experiences of WIL placements and their coping strategies for managing the reciprocal impacts of participation on other commitments. It considers how universities and WIL placement workplaces can better support students, particularly those from equity groups, in preparation for and during their WIL experiences. This part of the report outlines the methodology applied to the research project.

This research addresses four research questions:

1. How and to what extent do personal factors impact student experiences of WIL?
2. How and to what extent does WIL participation impact other life domains?
3. What personal strategies do students employ to manage WIL–life and life–WIL conflicts?
4. What forms of institutional and other supports could positively influence the wellbeing of students participating in a WIL experience?

Data Collection Approach

Three disciplines of study at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) were the focus of the research: health and social services, education, and nursing. Nursing has been separated from other health and social services disciplines due to the large cohort and differences in the structure of the degree. Figure 2 shows enrolments across these study areas and the representative rate of rural and regional students enrolled as a proportion of the total enrolment. Education, exercise and sport science, and nursing have the highest percentage of students from regional and remote areas.

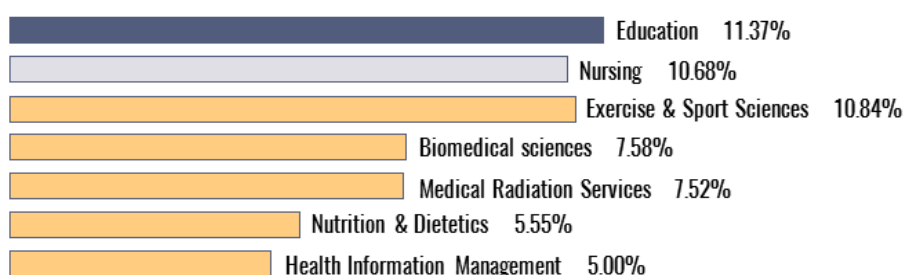


Figure 2. 2016 Representative rate of rural and regional students enrolled by area of study

(source: QUT Equity Unit)

Figure 3 shows the representative rate of low socioeconomic status students enrolled as a proportion of the total enrolment for the designated study areas. It is noteworthy that more than one-quarter of students enrolled in a biomedical sciences degree (25.76 per cent) are identified as low socioeconomic status students. Approaching one-fifth of all students undertaking a nursing (19.06 per cent) or health information management qualification (20 per cent) are identified as a low socioeconomic students.

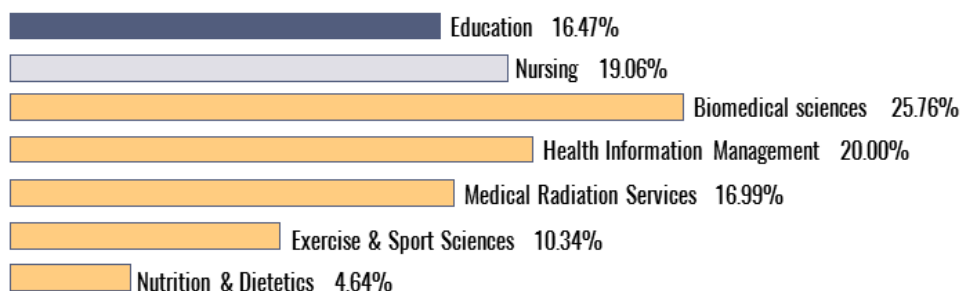


Figure 3. 2016 Representative rate of low socioeconomic status students enrolled by area of study (source: QUT Equity Unit)

As shown in Figure 4, data for this study was collected using three methods: an online student survey, student focus groups, and staff focus groups. The findings of the student survey and student focus groups are reported in Part 3 of this report. The findings of the staff focus groups are reported in Part 4 of this report.

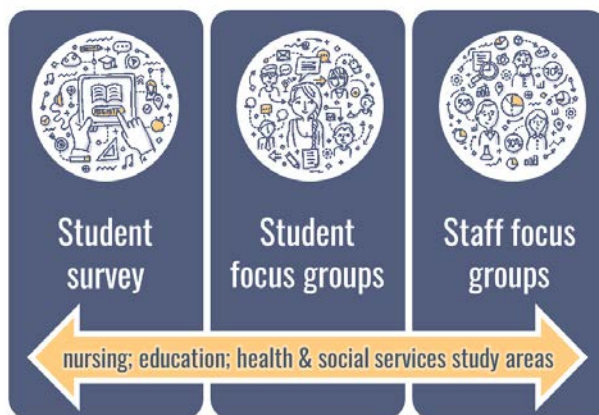


Figure 4. Data collection approach

Online Student Survey

Online surveys have been successfully applied in studies seeking participant perspectives and experiences of WIL (e.g. Kanno & Koesk 2010; Murray-Harvey *et al.* 2000; Spooner-Lane *et al.* 2007). The survey used in this research is based on an earlier pilot project conducted in 2015 by the researchers which tested the survey questions on a cohort of Graduate Diploma of Secondary Education students (refer to Grant-Smith & Gillett-Swan 2017 for an overview of pilot findings). The items in the pilot survey were developed based on a

review of the wellbeing and practicum literatures. The survey was designed to elicit responses regarding respondents' lived experiences of practicum. Biographical questions regarding respondent's prior education and practicum experience, and basic demographic information, were included to provide context for these responses and to understand the influence of intersectional factors. The survey used in this study was refined as a result of the findings of the pilot.

All students enrolled in a WIL unit within the faculties of Health and Education at QUT were invited to complete the survey. These faculties were selected as they have high levels of WIL participation. For example, in 2015 students in the health faculty are reported to have collectively completed more than 1.1 million hours of work placement (QUT 2016, *Hands on Health*), while education placement is a mandatory requirement of teacher professional registration (AITSL 2015; TEMAG 2015).

Using a purposive sampling strategy, students in the identified faculties who had participated in a WIL experience involving workplace attendance were approached via email invitation to complete an online survey. Of those contacted, 552 students completed the survey to a satisfactory level to be included in the analysis. The demographic characteristics of respondents are reported in Table 1. The majority of respondents identified as female (83 per cent , n=459). Of all survey respondents that reported an age (n=510) the mean age reported was 27 years of age. English was identified by the majority of participants (86 per cent , n=430) as the main language spoken at home. The majority of respondents were domestic students (91 per cent , n=473), enrolled as full-time internal students (90 per cent , n=494), and enrolled in an undergraduate coursework degree (85 per cent , n=465).

Table 1. Survey respondent characteristics

Gender							
female	549 (83%)	male	63 (11%)	undisclosed gender	30 (6%)		
Average age							
female	27 years	female	27 years	total cohort	27 years		
Main language spoken at home							
English	430 (86%)		Language other than English		70 (14%)		
Residency of enrolment status							
Domestic student		473 (91%)		International student		49 (9%)	
Enrolment status							
Full-time internal	494 (90%)	Full-time external	23 (4%)	Part-time internal	15 (3%)	Part-time external	17 (3%)
Degree type							
Undergraduate coursework		465 (85%)		Postgraduate coursework		79 (15%)	

As shown in Table 2, the majority of respondents did not have family caring responsibilities (76 per cent , n=396). Of those responding with family caring responsibilities, the majority had responsibility for children (76 per cent , n=94). The majority of respondents (77 per cent , n=400) indicated that they did not have children living in their home. Female respondents were more likely to have children at home (24 per cent , n=110) than male respondents (17 per cent , n=11). On average those with children living at home had two children in the household (n=110). The majority of those with caring responsibilities for children were the primary carer for the children (67 per cent , n=76).

Table 2. Survey respondent caring responsibilities

Family responsibilities			
Has family care responsibilities	396 (76%)	Does not have family care responsibilities	124 (24%)
Family responsibilities held			
Children	76 (61%)	Adult	30 (24%)
Children living at home (total cohort)		Adults and children	18 (15%)
Children living at home	122 (23%)	No children living at home	400 (77%)
Children living at home (female respondents)			
Children living at home	110 (24%)	No children living at home	352 (76%)
Children living at home (male respondents)			
Children living at home	11 (17%)	No children living at home	52 (83%)

As shown in Figure 5, close to a two-thirds majority of students participating in this research were enrolled in



an education (31 per cent , n=172) or nursing (30 per cent , n=167) degree. For reporting purposes, the remaining students have been collapsed into the category of health and social services which includes students enrolled in social work and human services degrees (10 per cent , n = 58); medical radiation services (seven per cent , n=41), paramedicine (six per cent , n=31), pharmacy (four per cent , n=20), biomedical sciences (two per cent , n=9), exercise and sport sciences (two per cent , n=14), nutrition and dietetics (two per cent , n=13), and a range of other degrees including health and information management, optometry, podiatry, psychology and public health (five per cent , n=27).

Figure 5. Survey respondents by area of study

Student Focus Groups

The online survey was designed to be supplemented with focus groups with a self-nominated cohort of students invited from each discipline. Students who completed the survey were invited to nominate their interest to participate in a post-survey focus group. Of these students, 252 indicated a willingness to be contacted to participate in a focus group. Despite strong interest in participating, due to conflicting priorities, only five students were able to participate in a focus group. Discussions occurring in the focus groups were audio-recorded. Students participating in a focus group were asked to discuss their personal experiences and anecdotally, the experiences of others. Despite the small numbers, this use of shadowed data offers the benefit of exploring the range of experiences beyond a single participant's personal experience (Morse 2000).

Focus groups were conducted on four different occasions with limited attendance. All focus group participants were female with one participant studying education and four studying a health and social services degree. Although the focus group sample size was small, there were similarities in responses from the students supporting the findings of the student survey. Four of the five focus group participants expressed broad satisfaction with their WIL experiences.

Issues raised in relation to the WIL workplace included: problematic and unsupportive professional interactions with colleagues and supervisors in the WIL workplace; the quality and frequency of feedback provided by WIL supervisors in the workplace and opportunities presented to address feedback received; difficult interactions with students, clients or patients; and the capacity of the WIL workplace to provide a high quality WIL experience based on the availability of organisational resources or supervisory support.

Issues raised in relation to respondents' personal circumstances included: the difficulties associated with juggling multiple roles and commitments while participating in a WIL placement; and transportation challenges associated with public transport access, time and availability. Discussions about the financial stress caused by participation in a WIL placement intersected with discussions around university supports including the availability and timing of institutional funding to support international placement.

Staff Focus Group

As it is possible that those experiencing the most difficulties combining practicum and their other caring, study and paid work responsibilities may be least able to participate in the research (either by survey or participation in a focus group), a focus group was undertaken with faculty involved in the delivery and administration of WIL experiences. The contributions of this cohort provide the opportunity to access additional shadowed data that is likely only known to those involved in the administration of WIL placements. At the invitation of the President and Secretary, the staff focus group was conducted as a workshop session at the 2016 national conference of the National Association of Field Experience Administrators¹ (NAFEA). From a diverse range of Australian universities and disciplines, 48 WIL administrators participated in the focus group. The staff focus group session was designed to provide additional insight into the nature of difficulties reported by students and the types of institutional support available and required.

Data Analysis Approach

The survey and focus group data was analysed using qualitative and quantitative approaches. The analyses sought to identify the impact that personal and other factors can have on the practicum experience, the impact of the practicum experience on other parts of the student's life such as paid work commitments and work–study–life conflicts, and the perceived impact of this on their wellbeing. Personal strategies, sometimes referred to as coping strategies (Chapman & Orb 2001), employed by students to manage these impacts and institutional and faculty intended to minimise adverse impacts in either domain were also identified.

Mixed-methods approaches were taken to analyse the data through descriptive statistics and content analysis. Descriptive statistics were undertaken using Microsoft Excel to investigate the demographics of the survey respondents and proportion of respondents who reported experiencing difficulties and challenges while undertaking practicum. Descriptive content analysis was used to thematically identify and describe the primary content and meaning within the data obtained from the open-ended survey questions.

¹ NAFEA represents tertiary administrators engaged in the logistical placement of students for field experiences. NAFEA membership includes administrators and academic staff from disciplines such as nursing, medicine, law, human services, human movement studies, and engineering. (www.nafea.org.au)

This resulted in categorising, listing and finally using presence and absence quantitative methods to count the frequency of themes within responses. Corresponding with the research questions, qualitative responses were coded for difficulties experienced and personal coping strategies were deployed to manage difficulties and proposed institutional support. Initial difficulties and coping strategies were based on previous theory and research on practicum stressors (e.g. Chaplain 2008; Klassen & Durksen 2014). Analysis was undertaken at a whole of cohort and, where appropriate, compares findings from across the three disciplines of study—education, nursing, and health and social services—or by other respondent characteristics such as gender or parental status.

As shown in Table 3, the top four respondent-identified themes were common to all disciplines. With the exception of the practical and 'real world' orientation of the placement experience which was uniformly the most common benefit across all disciplines, these themes were ranked differently depending on the discipline. Given the nature of the occupations that respondents hope to enter into it is surprising that very few rated interactions with clients, students or patients as one of the best things about participating in a WIL placement; no nursing or health and social services students rated this as a benefit of participation, and it was only mentioned by seven (four per cent) of the 165 education students responding to this question.

Table 3. Top five respondent-identified best things about undertaking WIL placement by area of study

	Education	Nursing	Health and social sciences
1	Practical 'real world' experience (n=110)	Practical 'real world' experience (n=92)	Practical 'real world' experience (n=118)
2	Opportunity for professional development (n=52)	Opportunity for professional development (n=52)	Opportunity for professional development (n=67)
3	Opportunity to apply learnt knowledge/skills (n=43)	Opportunity to apply learnt knowledge/skills (n=50)	Exposure to industry (n=66)
4	Exposure to industry (n=30)	Exposure to industry (n=36)	Opportunity to apply learnt knowledge/skills (n=64)
5	Opportunity to develop networks (n=14)	Staff interactions and mentors (n=12)	Opportunity to develop networks (n=16)

Respondents were also asked to identify the worst thing about undertaking a WIL placement. A total of 514 respondents provided an open ended answer to this question. The most common respondent-identified dis-benefit was the financial stress associated with participating in a WIL placement (32 per cent ; n=162). Other commonly reported dis-benefits which could be connected to student personal circumstances included the challenges associated with balancing work, life and study (28 per cent ; n=144) and the stresses associated with meeting the academic requirements of their degree (17 per cent ; n=89).

The major challenge associated with the WIL workplace identified by respondents was problematic interactions with mentors, staff and facilitators (29 per cent ; n=147). Issues associated with placement learning outcomes (14 per cent , n=71) and placement being a form of unpaid labour (10 per cent , n=52) were also frequently mentioned by respondents. Respondents also identified issues associated with the structure of their WIL placement (18 per cent ; n=95) such as the length and block nature of placements and the total number of required placement hours.

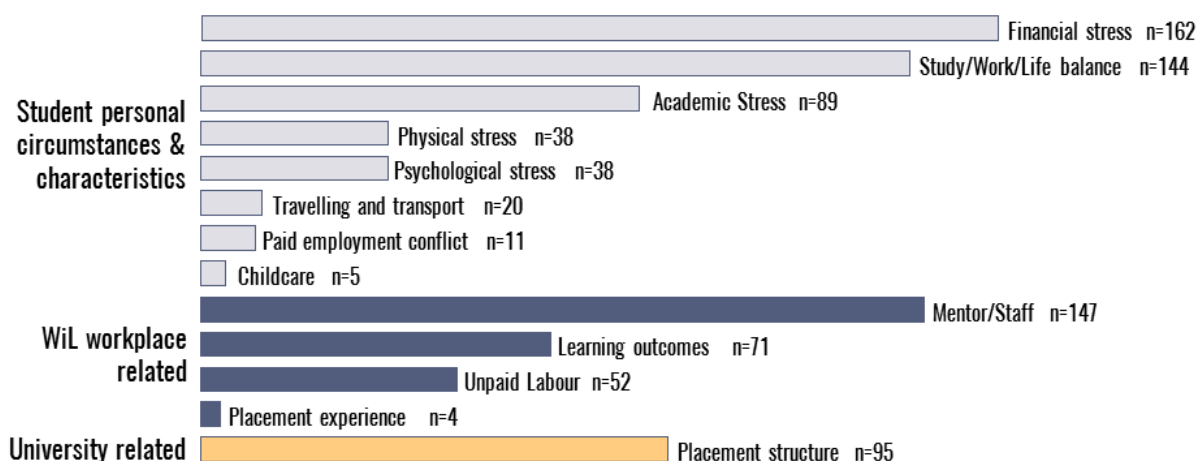


Figure 7. Respondent-identified worst things about undertaking WIL placement, total cohort

As shown in Table 4, the top five worst things about undertaking a WIL placement were consistent across all three areas of study, however, the ranking of these differed by discipline. Financial stress caused by WIL

participation was listed in the top two responses for all study areas, however, issues with mentors or staff at the WIL workplace was mentioned as an issue by nursing students more often than respondents from other disciplines of study. Being expected to undertake unpaid labour was considered more of an issue by nursing and health and social services students (11 per cent and 14 per cent of respondents respectively) than by education students (six per cent).

Table 4. Top five respondent-identified worst things about undertaking WIL placement by area of study

	Education	Nursing	Health and social services
1	Financial stress (32%, n=53)	Mentor/Staff (45%, n=67)	Study/Work/Life balance (38%, n=75)
2	Study/Work/Life balance (25%, n=41)	Financial stress (23%, n=35)	Financial stress (37%, n=75)
3	Mentor/Staff (24%, n=40)	Study/Work/Life balance (19%, n=29)	Mentor/Staff (20%, n=40)
4	Placement structure (20%, n=34)	Placement structure (17%, n=25)	Academic stress (19%, n=38)
5	Academic stress (16%, n=27)	Academic stress (17%, n=25)	Placement structure (19%, n=27)

Challenges Experienced as a Result of Practicum Participation

When asked whether the survey respondents anticipated experiencing any difficulties combining their other responsibilities with their placement responsibilities, a clear majority (75 per cent, n=404) of the 538 respondents had either experienced difficulties or anticipated experiencing difficulties. As shown in Figure 8, male respondents were less likely than female respondents to report experiencing difficulties combining WIL placement with their other responsibilities. Overall, two-thirds (66 per cent, n=21) of male respondents experience difficulties compared to more than three-quarters of female respondents (77 per cent, n=349).

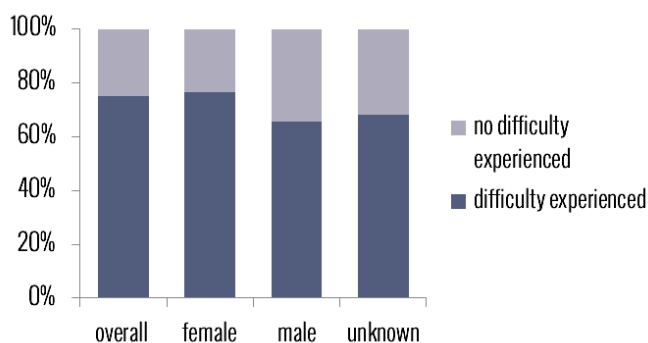


Figure 8. Whether difficulties combining WIL placement with other responsibilities was experienced by gender

Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they believed different personal factors and responsibilities impacted on their WIL placement and the extent to which they believed participation in a WIL placement impacted on their other responsibilities. Although averages are reported in Table 5 it should be noted there was a large spread in responses against each category. While participation in a WIL placement was seen to have the highest impacts on paid work and personal finances, it was also seen to have a considerable impact on other study commitments, transport, and health and wellbeing.

Table 5. Average of reciprocal impacts of WIL placement and other responsibilities
(scale 0 – 100, where 0 = no impact and 100 = significant impact)

Category	Extent to which WIL placement impacts on respondents and their responsibilities		Extent to which respondents' personal factors and responsibilities impact WIL placement	
	n	mean	n	mean
Family Responsibilities	458	51	380	43
Childcare	156	39	130	31
Paid work	447	79	351	59
Other study	379	61	323	53
Health and wellbeing	474	56	408	57
Personal finances	486	72	378	62
Transport	430	59	327	53

Figure 9 shows that respondents ranked the impact of WIL on their other responsibilities as being more significant than the impact of their other responsibilities and personal factors on their WIL placement. A lack of personal finances and paid work commitments were considered to have the highest impacts on WIL placement, however, it should be noted that health and wellbeing was ranked as having equal reciprocal impacts.

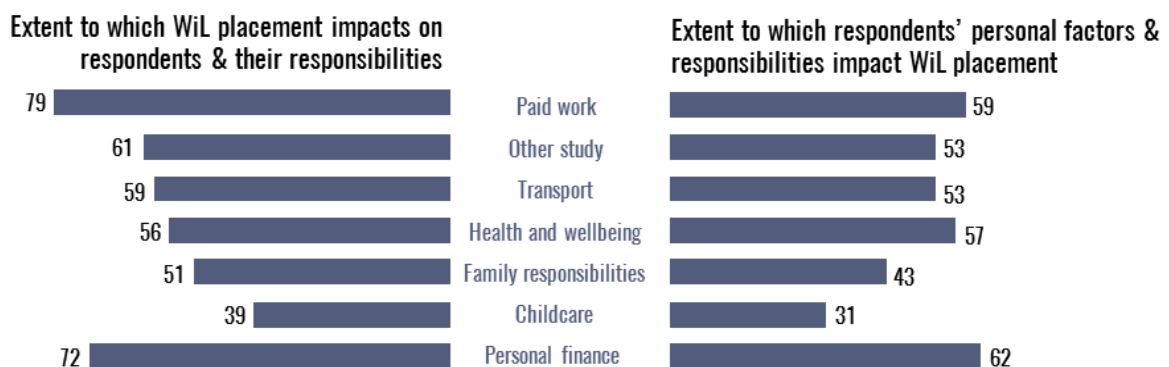


Figure 9. Average of reciprocal impacts of WIL placement and other responsibilities
(scale 0 – 100, where 0 = no impact and 100 = significant impact)

Financial Stress Experienced

Respondents were asked to comment on their financial situation at various times during the year. The majority of respondents (96 per cent) reported being either financially secure or adequate outside of semester. However, there were significant differences between the academic calendar categories outside of semester ($X^2=222.11$, $n=537$, $df=2$, $p=5.99$), during semester ($X^2=340.99$, $n=542$, $df=2$, $p=5.99$), and during placement ($X^2=181.57$, $n=543$, $df=2$, $p=5.99$). Significant differences were also found between the financial categories of secure ($X^2=198.15$, $n=467$, $df=2$, $p=5.99$), adequate ($X^2=75.92$, $n=790$, $df=2$, $p=5.99$), and struggling ($X^2=365$, $n=365$, $df=2$, $p=5.99$). Students reported being most financially secure (54 per cent, $n=292$) outside of semester. The lowest levels of financial struggle (four per cent, $n=21$) were also reported outside of semester. The level of financial security enjoyed by respondents dropped during semester with the majority still experiencing secure or adequate levels of financial security (93 per cent, $n=503$), however, as shown Figure 10, the ratio of secure to adequate financial position changed from 1.3 : 1 to 1 : 2.7. The most significant shift was the increase in students reporting that they were financially struggling. The shift between outside and during semester was minimal. However, the difference between those experiencing financial

hardship during semester (seven per cent , n=39) and during practicum (56 per cent , n=305) was significant, with 12 times as many students struggling financially.

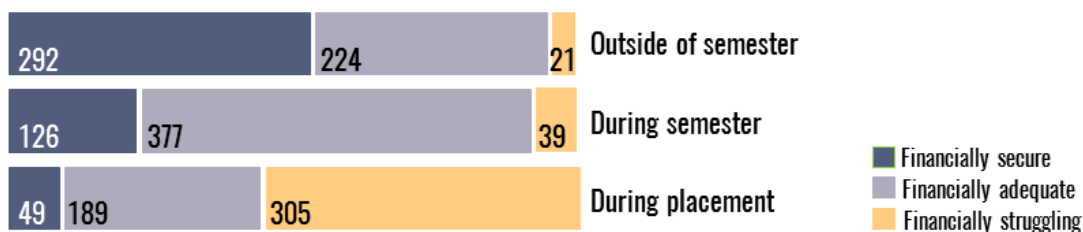


Figure 10. Respondent financial situation

Only eight per cent of respondents reported no additional costs associated with WIL placement (n=38). As shown in Figure 11, more than half of all respondents (53 per cent) indicated that they experienced an increase in transport costs as a result of participation in a WIL placement. Other significant costs included the purchase of work appropriate clothing (19 per cent), food for consumption at WIL workplace (16 per cent), and resources and materials for use at the WIL workplace (13 per cent).

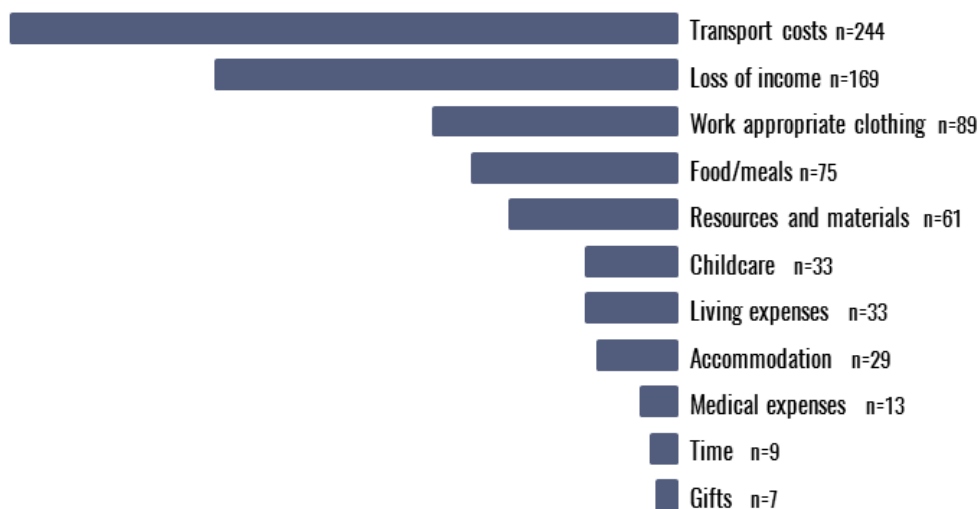


Figure 11. Additional costs and financial losses incurred as a result of WIL participation

While more than half the respondents reported paid work as their main source of income (56 per cent , n=310), two-thirds of respondents reported that they did not have paid employment at the time of the survey (67 per cent , n=82). The other main sources of income for respondents were family (24 per cent , n=132), government income support (15 per cent , n=85), scholarships/stipend (three per cent , n=14) and savings (one per cent , n=5). The normal average number of paid hours worked by respondents per week was 13.3 hours (SD±7.8 hrs). Just over half of respondents in paid employment reported that they continued paid employment during their placement (57 per cent , n=47). The average number of hours that were worked in paid employment while undertaking WIL placement was reported to be nine hours/week (SD±4.6 hours). More than one-third of respondents indicated that they had experienced financial loss as a result of lost income (37 per cent) due to participation in WIL. As shown in Table 6, loss of income ranked in the top two expenses incurred as a result of WIL participation across all study areas.

Table 6. Top five respondent-identified additional costs incurred as a result of WIL placement by area of study

	Education	Nursing	Health and social services
1	Loss of income (41%, n=59)	Transport (66%, n=89)	Transport (54%, n=98)
2	Transport (40%, n=57)	Loss of income (42%, n=42)	Loss of income (38%, n=68)
3	Resources and materials (31%, n=45)	Food and meals (25%, n=34)	Work appropriate clothing (18%, n=33)
4	Work appropriate clothing (20%, n=28)	Work appropriate clothing (21%, n=28)	Food and meals (17%, n=31)
5	Childcare (10%, n=14)	Childcare (10%, n=14)	Accommodation (12%, n=21)

Additional costs associated with transport to and from the WIL workplace were ranked in the top two additional expenses across all cohorts. The qualitative data shows that additional transport costs incurred by nursing students are more likely to be associated with parking at hospitals or taking taxis. This is associated with undertaking late/night shifts. Additional transport costs incurred by other students were most likely to be fuel and car related, particularly if the WIL placement site was not located conveniently to public transport routes or the timing and availability of services has not aligned with the hours worked.

The purchase of additional resources and materials was more significant for teachers than other cohorts. These additional expenses were associated with the purchase of teaching supplies and materials for student use. However, the need to purchase work appropriate clothing for use on the WIL placement affected all cohorts. For respondents involved in health and social services and nursing, these costs were often associated with the purchase of uniforms or specialist attire. For education and some health and social sciences students (where uniforms were not required), these costs were associated with having access to a sufficient professional wardrobe in terms of number of outfits and their suitability for the workplace, including shoes.

The purchase of meals and food was a considerable cost for students studying nursing and health and social services. Based on the qualitative responses this is likely due to the need to purchase food (either on site or on the way home) due to shift work or a desire to eat with their colleagues as form of professional socialising. Although fewer than one-quarter of all respondents reported family care responsibilities (n=124), the majority of respondents with caring responsibilities are responsible for children (76 per cent). Although the number of survey respondents with childcare responsibilities was not high, additional childcare costs incurred as a consequence of participation in a WIL placement represented an important cost for participants within the nursing and education cohorts.

Respondent Self Reported Wellbeing and Socio-emotional responses to WIL Participation

Respondents were asked to rate the emotions they experienced while undertaking a WIL placement. As shown in Figure 12, respondents reported high levels of happiness and enjoyment while undertaking their placement. However, they also reported feeling tired. This is not unexpected as the practicum is a widely recognised period of intense learning (Mason 2006; Levett-Jones *et al.* 2008; Patrick *et al.* 2009). Moderate levels of feeling worried or anxious or impatient for the WIL placement to end were also reportedly experienced. Feelings of depression, being hassled, pushed around, criticised and facing hostility were not reported to be a significant feature of the WIL experience.

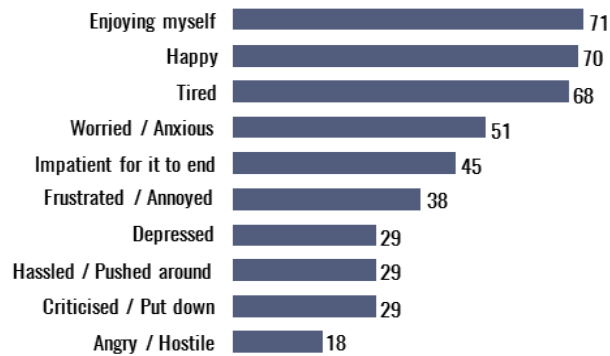


Figure 12. Average score of feelings experienced on WIL placement
(0 = did not experience this feeling, 100 = this feeling was a very important part of this experience)

Respondent Identified WIL Coping Strategies

A number of respondents reported not having any strategies to reduce the impact of WIL participation (14 per cent , n=33). As shown in Figure 13, the most commonly reported strategy for minimising the impacts of WIL on other responsibilities and commitments were financial in nature, including through budgeting (35 per cent , n=124), which in most instances referred to reducing spending before and during placement.

The prioritisation strategies used by respondents such as pre-planning and preparation (26 per cent , n=93) and time management assisted them in managing the impact of their placement on their other commitments and responsibilities. This also included adopting additional strategies around meal preparation and planning (26 per cent , n=93) and time management (20 per cent , n=71). These strategies were also utilised in managing the impacts of their other responsibilities on their WIL experience, however many students highlighted the prioritisation of WIL as their preeminent obligation (19 per cent , n=46) which resulted in other commitments being deprioritised for the period of the placement.

Students reported making a number of alternative arrangements to assist them to manage the impact of WIL on their other responsibilities and commitments. Making alternative work arrangements (18 per cent , n=66), transport arrangements (19 per cent , n=69), and childcare arrangements (nine per cent , n=34) were frequently discussed. Conversely, alternative work arrangements (18 per cent , n=43) were more commonly utilised to manage the impact of responsibilities and personal factors on WIL than making alternative arrangements across other areas. These alternative arrangements often resulted in seeking additional support (for example, childcare) from family and friends. Indeed, respondents reported being highly dependent on support from family and friends (31 per cent , n=112) to manage the impact of WIL on their other commitments. These were also important strategies to manage the impact of their other responsibilities on their WIL placement. Contrary to reports regarding the prevalence of substance abuse as a coping strategy by university students (Park & Levenson 2002), there was no reporting of maladaptive or avoidance coping strategies of this nature within this study.

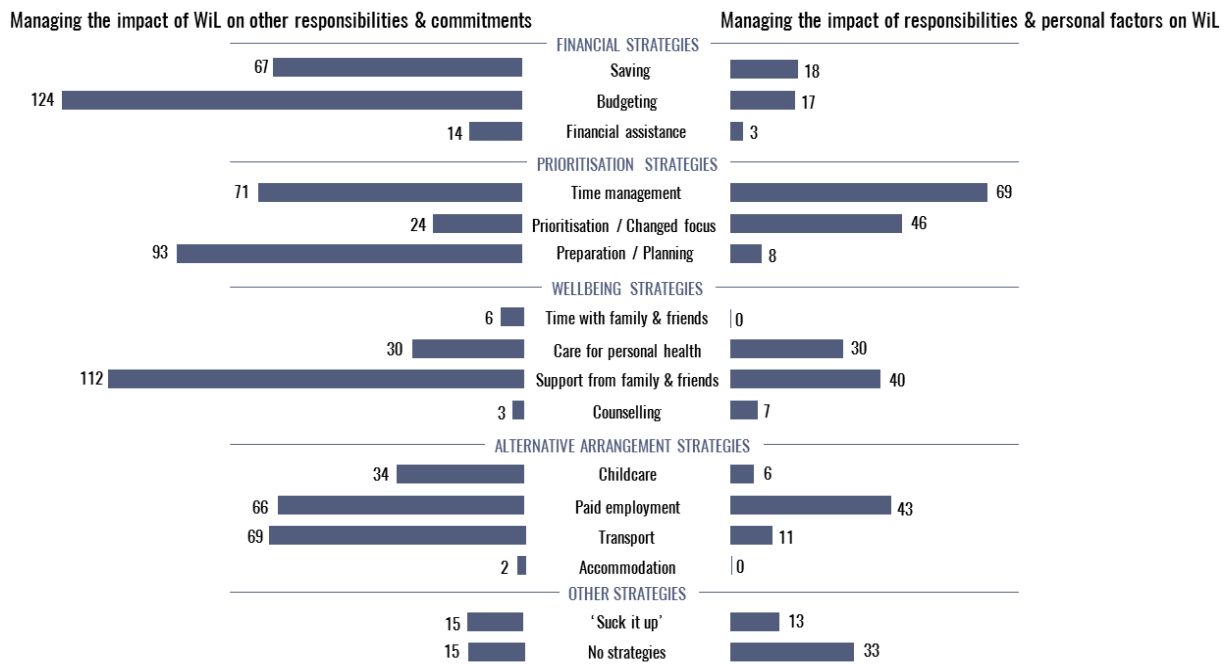


Figure 13. Personal strategies for managing the reciprocal impacts of WIL participation

When considering the impacts of financial challenges experienced, respondents were asked to articulate any specific strategies that they may have put in place (or that they planned to put in place) to reduce the financial impacts experienced during placement (Figure 14). Saving money prior to placement was the most frequently mentioned strategy in response to the financial impact of placement (39 per cent , n=176). Other strategies utilised included working more outside of placement (16 per cent , n= 72), working during placement (14 per cent , n = 62), getting support from family members (14 per cent , n=61), reducing spending and only paying for necessary items (11 per cent , n = 51), and preparing meals in advance/reducing the amount of food bought and consumed (nine per cent , n =41). Nine per cent of those who answered the question said that they did not use any financial strategies (n=39).

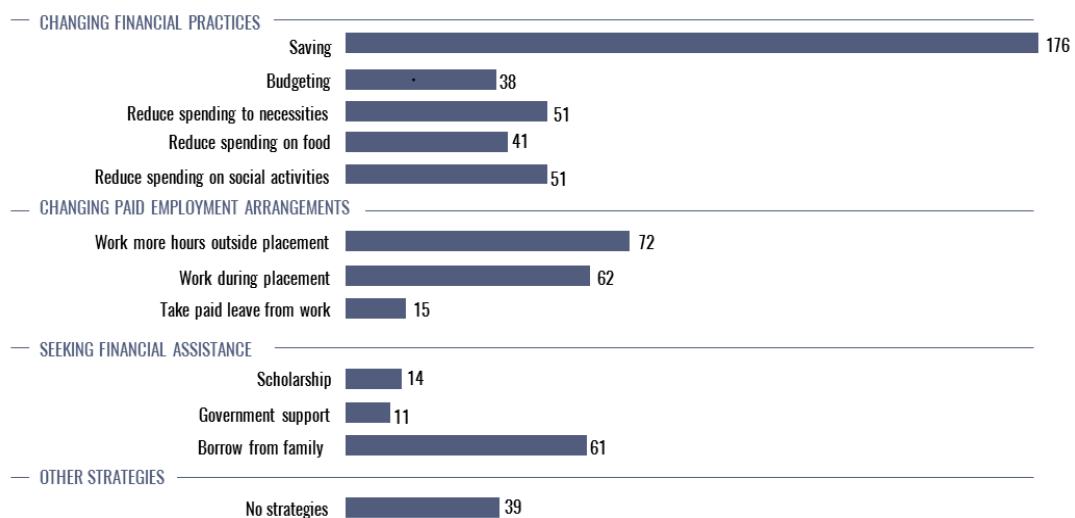


Figure 14. Personal strategies for managing the financial impact of WIL participation

Support Accessed

As shown in Figure 15, more than half of all respondents (54 per cent , n=280) accessed financial and other support from family and friends. Few respondents reported accessing financial (17 per cent , n=89) or other support (12 per cent , n=63) from the university. Close to two-fifths (38 per cent , n=198) of respondents reported they did not access any support from any source. These patterns of support accessed held consistent across all three disciplines of study.

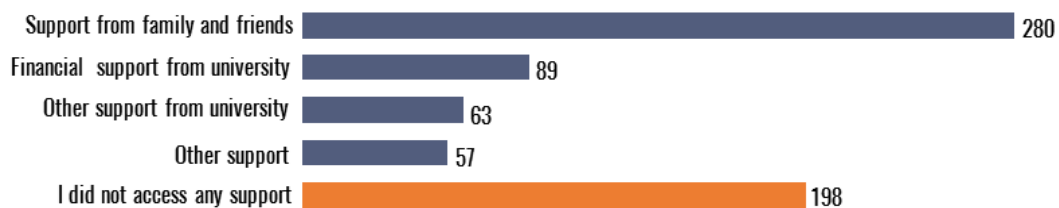


Figure 15. Support accessed during WIL placement

Figure 16 shows the types of support accessed from the university. Overall, low levels of access were reported. In instances where respondents indicated they were aware of support provided by the university but could not access this support, they were asked to identify the reason(s) why. The majority of respondents (89 per cent , n=164) who were unable to access a specific support service identified they did not meet the eligibility criteria. In most cases, these related to attempts to access some form of financial support. The majority of these involved respondents unsuccessfully applying for assistance, however, a number of respondents (six per cent , n=11) suggested that they did not even apply believing they were ineligible. A small but significant number of respondents (11 per cent , n=20) indicated that participation in a WIL placement rendered them physically unable to access the desired support service. For instance, the location of the placement or its timing made it impossible for some respondents to access university–provided counselling support services or the food bank within business hours.

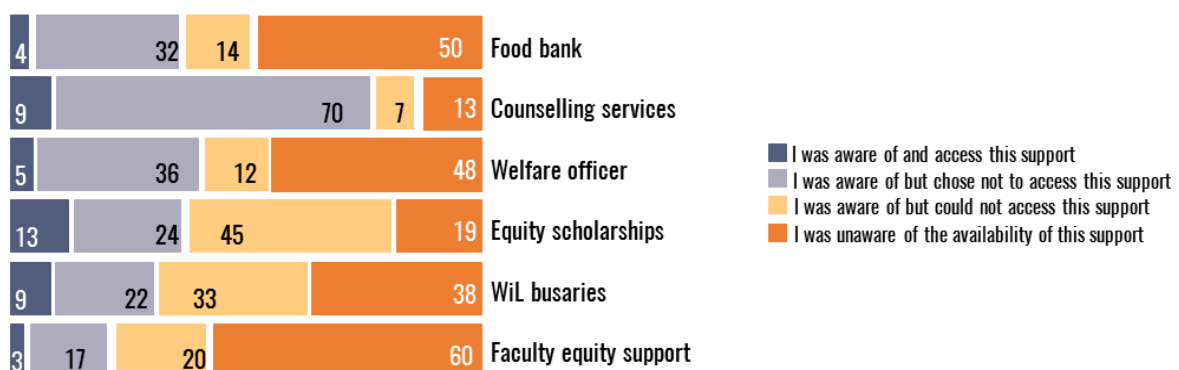


Figure 16. Types of support accessed from university during WIL placement

Other Support Desired

Respondents were asked if there were any additional resources or support that could assist them in their WIL placement. The majority (64 per cent , n=305) did not identify any additional resources. The remaining

respondents (36 per cent , n=172) identified that additional supports were required, with 144 respondents listing possible supports. The most frequently requested support centred on changes to the placement structure (25 per cent , n=36). Suggestions included reducing the number of days/hours required or changing when attendance is required to reduce the length or intensity of periods of unpaid work. Many respondents indicated that these changes would reduce financial stress as it would facilitate their ability to continue to work in paid employment while participating in an unpaid placement.

Interpersonal supports, such as through academic staff visiting WIL worksites and staff having more empathy for the student experience (17 per cent , n=25) were rated as important. A range of financial supports (24 per cent , n=34), in particular, government financial support such as government funded payments were proposed to help to manage the financial stress caused by participation unpaid placements. A further nine per cent (n=13) believed they should be paid by the employer, that is, paid WIL placement.



4. Staff Perspectives on WIL Placement Challenges, Opportunities and Support

This part of the report presents the findings of the staff focus groups regarding their perspectives on WIL placement challenges, opportunities, and support. The data reported in this section was collected through a focus group that was conducted as a concurrent scheduled session within the National Association of Field Experience Administrators annual conference. All participants opted to be involved in the focus group which was run in a workshop style format. Participants engaged in activities in groups of between six to eight people and used facilitator prompts to brainstorm their responses. Each group created an unranked list of WIL placement challenges. Each participant was then asked to individually identify which challenges they considered to be the three most important placement challenges of those identified within their group. Participants were then asked to thematically group the identified placement challenges, which were then shared with the whole room in a whole group harvest, to create a consolidated list. Facilitators recorded the thematic groups identified at the front of the room so that all tables/groups could see the emergent groups of challenges identified. Each group was then asked to identify strategies that they used or knew about to support the challenges identified through the brainstorming activity and group thematic analysis. These were then individually rated by participants using stickers to identify the most important strategies.

Figure 17 shows all placement challenge themes identified in the faculty focus group data. All of the placement challenges identified in the staff focus group could be grouped into three categories: student personal circumstances and characteristics, WIL workplace related, and university related (see Figure 17). The most frequently acknowledged theme related to the university related placement management (n=12), followed closely by student personal circumstances involving study/work/life balance (n=11), and conflicting expectations (n=11). There were more themes identified by the staff as challenges within the student personal circumstances and characteristics than WIL workplace related or university related factors.

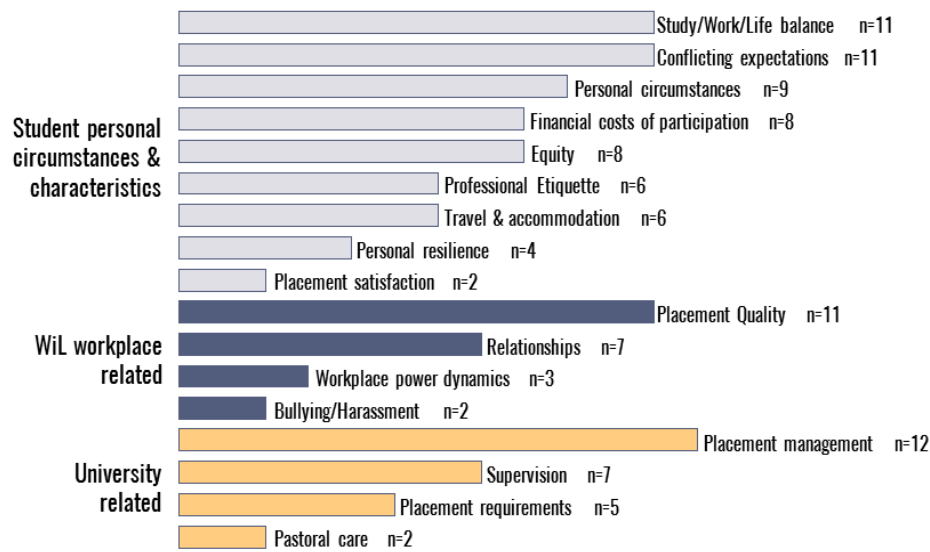


Figure 17. Placement challenges identified in staff focus group (n=48)

Figure 18 shows the ranked themes based on staff-identified importance. Again these themes were categorised within student personal circumstances and characteristics, WIL workplace related, or university related factors. Staff rated student financial costs (n=26) and study/work/life balance (n=24) as the most important placement challenges experienced by students, with the university related factor of placement management (n=23) also an important contributor to placement challenges.

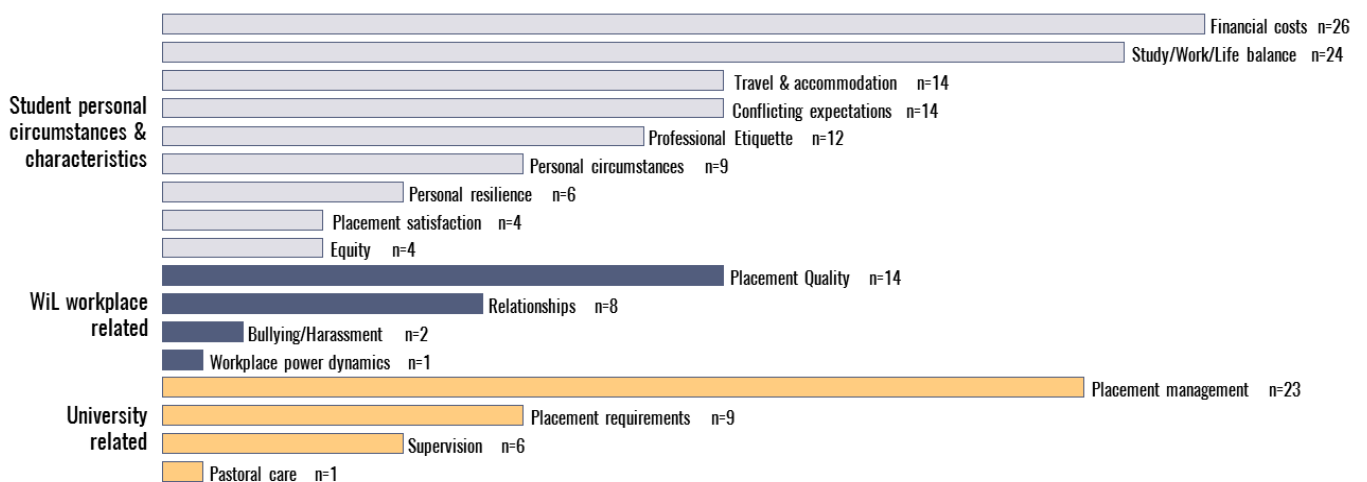


Figure 18. Placement challenges rated by order of importance in staff focus group

The Impact of Student Personal Circumstances and Characteristics on WIL Participation

Previous research has confirmed that both the perceptions of impact of personal circumstances as well as the actual impact of personal circumstances have significant implications for students undertaking a WIL placement. Brough *et al.* (2015) determined that students' desires to be seen as professional led them to

keep their personal circumstances as private as possible, which has implications for administrator and staff ability to provide the level of support that may be needed in some circumstances. Furthermore, the burden of balancing practicum demands with their personal responsibilities in some cases leads to career change choices and course attrition, each of which have potential implications for the sustainability of some industries (McCall *et al.* 2009; Nolan & Rouse 2013).

The staff focus group results confirm the findings of previous research and the student perspective reported in Part 3 of this report. Staff respondents identified that participation in a WIL placement creates a financial, organisational, and personal burden for participants. These challenges are particularly evident for those with family responsibilities involving care of adults (Walters *et al.* 1996) or children (Bexley *et al.* 2013; Hemy *et al.* 2016; Moore *et al.* 2012; Wray & McCall 2007) as they require students to source and fund alternative or additional caring and support options above their normal study load participation arrangements.

The staff focus groups recognised that students sometimes make choices about their WIL placements based on personal circumstances which may have academic implications. For example, participants with caring responsibilities may be restricted in their choice of practicum location or may have to make choices which facilitate their capacity to manage multiple roles rather than optimise their learning outcomes (Hemy *et al.* 2016). The staff focus group participants further recognised that students also make choices based on their financial circumstances which may impact their learning and levels of academic achievement (Brough *et al.* 2015; Duignan 2003; Hemy *et al.* 2016). The difficulty balancing work and placement also places additional strain on other areas of student's lives (Johnstone *et al.* 2016); the staff focus groups confirmed that in their experience, many students sacrifice leisure, rest, and social time, in order to prepare for their placement and study (Hemy *et al.* 2016).

Staff focus group results confirmed that numerous aspects of the placement experience were seen to impact on student personal circumstances including additional stress resulting from the demands of placement (Ward 2005), which can then be transferred across other life domains. Consistent with the literature, staff identified that many students experience professional and/or personal isolation when undertaking a placement (Ward 2005), which, when combined with other factors such as financial strain, has significant impacts on their health and wellbeing (Bexley *et al.* 2013; Brough *et al.* 2015). Personal exhaustion, anxiety and a fear of being seen as not coping with the placement was identified as adding additional stress to an already stressful experience for students (Brough *et al.* 2015; Johnstone *et al.* 2016; Wray & McCall 2007). Aligning with previous research, staff suggested that students with family obligations and no additional support from family and friends may experience a higher level of anxiety and stress than those who do not have these responsibilities (Hemy *et al.* 2016), which were consistent findings across both student and staff participant cohorts in our study.

Consistent with the literature, staff identified that students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds experience additional challenges when participating in a WIL placement. For example, they may experience difficulty building rapport during their placements (Gibson *et al.* 2015), which adds to the challenges that impact on their placement experiences. Furthermore, the difficulties of ensuring access to work experience learning and equity in provision has been further highlighted as particularly impacting different types of students such as international students, students with a disability, students with family responsibilities and/or employment, as well as regional/remote and Indigenous students (Patrick *et al.* 2009). The literature also finds that students participating in a WIL placement often experience a mismatch between their expectations of the role and the realities of practice (Bates & Bates 2013; Drury-Hudson 1999); the staff focus groups suggested that this mismatched expectation was often experienced by both participants and supervisors in the WIL workplace. They also confirmed prior research that students find the amount of knowledge and the speed with which it must be acquired for their placements to be overwhelming and a further contributor to these mismatched or conflicting expectations between the student, placement location, and university (Mason 2006; Levett-Jones *et al.* 2008). Some staff commentary was also made on poor behaviour by WIL participants who, they believed, had the capacity to reflect poorly on the university and to

impact the relationship between the university and the WIL workplace. These included a lack of appropriate professional etiquette displayed by some of the student cohort while participating in WIL activities.

WIL Workplace Issues and Challenges

The staff focus groups confirmed the importance of the mentor or supervisor on placement as playing a crucial role in influencing the career perceptions of the student as well as the student's development as a professional (Brough *et al.* 2015; Nolan & Rouse 2013). Also critical to the success of a student's professional experience is the relationship between the placement location and university (Nagrajan 2012; O'Connor *et al.* 2009; Wayne *et al.* 2010), without which, expectations, support, and intended outcomes may not be achieved. Workplaces where student education is contextualised can make a significant difference to the student's developing skills and capacity (Abery *et al.* 2015; Bogo *et al.* 2014; Patrick *et al.* 2009) making the quality of the placement across experience, supervision, and relationships particularly important. Student experiences on placement have been instrumental in assisting them in their transition from education to professional practice (Abery *et al.* 2015; Billet 2009) as well as often crucial in their future job placement success (Hemy *et al.* 2016).

Staff in the focus groups identified that some WIL workplaces did not provide a high quality learning experience for participants and the opportunity to practice what they have learnt in university in the workplace (Patrick *et al.* 2009). This is particularly problematic for disciplines such as education, where the role is highly reliant on developing skills, confidence, and capability in practical application of university knowledge. Students in other disciplines such as child-protection, also find placement difficult if they feel ill-equipped to cope with the demands and complexity of the work in the profession (Bates & Bates 2013; Drury-Hudson 1999). It is often not until they are on placement that this realisation occurs. Consistent with the literature (Johnstone *et al.* 2016; SMC 2012; Nicholson *et al.* 2011; Patrick *et al.* 2009; Roberts *et al.* 2012) and student accounts, the staff focus group also highlighted the importance of engaged and experienced supervision and the provision of meaningful activities in a successful WIL experience. They also highlighted a number of issues associated with unsupportive or incompetent supervision within the WIL workplace. In addition to creating an environment which is not conducive to learning, the participants in the staff focus group highlighted the impacts on student self-confidence, self-efficacy and feelings of worth and value within the WIL workplace which is supported in the literature in considering the impact that the student's relationship with their supervisor has on their wellbeing and learning while on placement (AITSL 2015; Levett-Jones *et al.* 2008; Mason 2006; Nagrajan 2012; Nicholson *et al.* 2011; Patrick *et al.* 2009; SMC 2012;). Lack of support in placement organisations (whether perceived or actual) contributes to the length of time required for students to 'find their feet' in the organisation (Ward 2005).

While some placement organisations fail to respond to student personal circumstances, some research has found that certain students were given preference for placement shifts due to their family responsibilities, meaning that those without, needed to bear additional burden and load with being on call or having the more difficult shift (Fenwick *et al.* 2016). The variability in placement experience and responsibilities associated with participation therefore increases the difficulty in advance planning for practicum completion and insecurity in knowing whether each individual student's personal circumstances will inhibit or foster their placement participation. The staff focus groups also highlighted a number of potentially troubling issues associated with practices within the WIL environment such as power dynamics (SMC 2012) and inappropriate conduct including bullying and harassment.

Institutional Issues and Challenges

Staff respondents advanced the position that the quality of a student's WIL learning experience is highly dependent on effective liaison between the individual's academic and industry supervisors (Nagrajan 2012;

O'Connor *et al.* 2009). While the roles of university and industry based supervisors have long been seen as critical to the success of placement in providing the links between the placement organisation and the university (Wayne *et al.* 2010), varied supervision and relationships between students and university then has implications for student's placement success (Patrick *et al.* 2009)—particularly when things go wrong in the field (Parker 2011). The degree to which students seek help from the university varies, and while some students value assistance from academic staff more highly than from other sources (Lo 2002), others are disinclined to seek help from academics, being “unsure of the validity of their questions or whether staff would respond positively” (Benson *et al.* 2009, p. 548). Similarly, although the workplace supervisor-student relationship is key to satisfaction with placement learning (QUT 2011), a student's social network is often where a student will turn to discuss their placement experiences and concerns (Hemy *et al.* 2016).

A number of administrative matters related to the placement also were discussed. Consistent with the literature around WIL administration, these included the availability of placement sites and competition for supervisors (Astin *et al.* 2005; McKenna & Wellard 2004; Moore 2015; Neill & Taylor 2002), lack of adequate preparation for the first clinical experience (Australian Capital Territory Health 2007; Bates *et al.* 2007; Levett-Jones *et al.* 2008), and a lack of support from the university such as a lack of supportive timetabling and placement policies which placed unnecessary obstacles in the path of students particularly for those with additional personal commitments such as family or postgraduate study (Bosch 2013). This emphasises some of the administrative and logistical issues that are experienced by WIL administrators which may also impact the student placement. Staff discussion also considered a range of administrative matters associated with managing WIL placements from the perspective of the university. These highlighted the challenges in sourcing high quality placements for students and the increasing numbers of students participating in placements. These challenges were exacerbated by the late cancellation of placements by WIL workplaces, and the high level of competition for placements between students, between disciplines and between higher education institutions. They also highlighted the important role that students must play in ensuring that pre-placement requirements are met such as obtaining a Blue Card².

Staff Perspectives on Strategies to Support WIL

Figure 19 shows the themes which arose from the staff focus group. Prior to importance ranking, the most commonly mentioned strategy was in relation to pre-placement preparation and training for students (n=16). Another prominent student focused strategy included the provision of financial support for WIL. WIL workplace and university focused strategies included proposals for pre-placement preparation and training for WIL workplace supervisors (n=9) and the need for enhanced transparency and communication between students, WIL staff and WIL workplace supervisors.

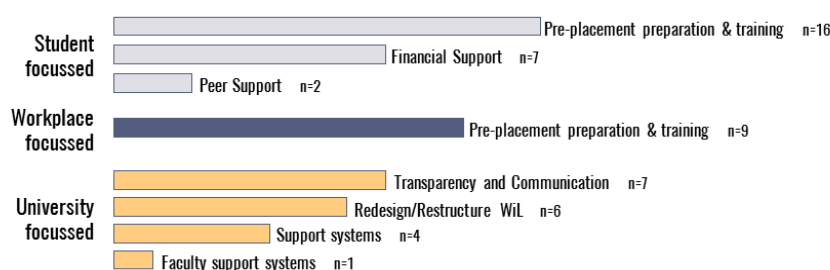


Figure 19. Strategies to support WIL identified in staff focus group

² The Blue Card system is also known as the Working with Children Check administered by the Queensland Government (Queensland Government 2016).

Figure 20 shows the ranked results of the strategy themes that the faculty staff thought were the most important strategies to assist in placement challenges. Pre-placement preparation and training for students remained the most popular strategy suggested, though it was three and a half times more popular than the next ranked strategy, pre-placement preparation and training for workplace supervisors.

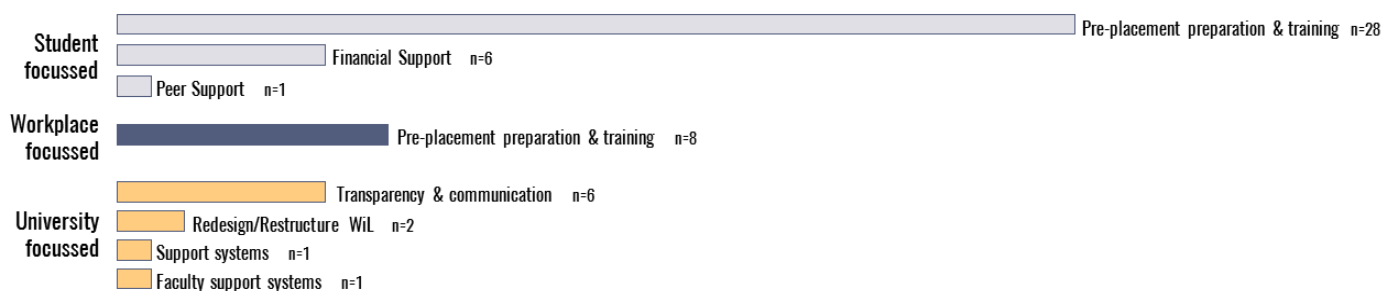


Figure 20. Strategies to support WIL rated by order of importance in staff focus group

Pre-placement preparation has the potential to assist students to address expectations and reduce the amount of conflict and difficulties for both the students and the faculty managing placements. The results from the staff focus group confirmed the importance of supported pre-placement preparation and training, both in terms of expectations and adjustment to work-life (Delany & Bragge 2009), resources and access (SMC 2012) and opportunities to develop their professional skills and confidence (Johnstone *et al.* 2016; Nolan & Rouse 2013). Proposals for implementing this strategy included requiring students to attend pre-placement briefings and to complete a range of extra-curricular online pre-placement training modules and targeted offerings as part of coursework requirements. Staff suggested that participation in these activities would assist to prepare students for placement but would also provide an opportunity for WIL staff to assess their readiness and suitability for participation and to put in place interventions and additional support for at-risk students. These sessions could also provide a platform for promoting available support services such as counselling services, financial aid and food banks.

Placement preparation is equally important for supervisors and workplaces to ensure that the expectations of all parties are clear, understood, and supported in the necessary way. The quality of the WIL learning experience is variable with some locations offering excellent learning opportunities while others treat students as superfluous to the workforce (Hall 2010; Wray & McCall 2007) or in an exploitative or unethical way (SMC 2012). Ensuring that all stakeholders are clear on the expectations for the WIL placement and have received appropriate training and support, will create a better synergy between the different expectations, and increase the likelihood of ensuring the work provided is at a standard suitable for the WIL participants based on their level of knowledge and stage of study. Supervision quality also has a strong influence on students' WIL learning experience and wellbeing (Mason 2006; Levett-Jones *et al.* 2008). Staff suggested that appropriate pre-placement preparation and training of WIL workplace supervisors has the potential to increase consistency of expectations and supervisory quality. It was suggested that this training should seek to educate supervisors on WIL learning outcomes and expectations as well as cultural differences. This should be supported with improved access to university staff to answer questions about in-placement issues or address any further issues that may arise.

The significance of the impact that financial strain has on student participation in placement is well documented (Lomax-Smith *et al.* 2011; Wray & McCall 2007), with the quality of the placement learning experience substantially compromised due to student financial stress (Bates 2005; Brough *et al.* 2015; Collins *et al.* 2008). This indicates the need for greater attention to be placed on the financial support available for students undertaking work integrated learning placements. Staff focus group participants described numerous types of financial support available to students such as scholarships, bursaries and

grants, loans, reimbursement schemes, and paid placements, many of which are already available to students, yet are under-accessed and utilised. It was noted that student reluctance to access this type of financial support may be due to a number of factors including not knowing about the support available, considering themselves ineligible, considering that others' may be in greater need of the support and therefore they leave it for others to access instead of them, or also the perceived stigma associated with seeking support and the perception that the individual is not able to cope while on placement as reflecting negatively on themselves and their capabilities.



5. Discussion of Findings

The increasing focus on WIL as a rite of passage to transition from education to employment has at its heart a focus on learning outcomes and individual professional development that are tied to workplace contexts. An increasing number of degrees now offer WIL as a structured part of the curriculum which offers participants the opportunity to gain skills and knowledge which presumably they cannot learn in the formal classroom (Burke

& Carton 2013; Orrell 2011). Although unpaid work in this context is rationalised on the basis of the importance of experiential learning in an authentic workplace setting, there is a growing body of literature that is critical of the effectiveness of this approach (Rickhuss 2015). Critiques also suggest this expansion of unpaid work may have the perverse outcome of cheapening all labour (including graduate labour and for the broader workforce) by working to exert downward pressure on the wages and opportunities of others in the labour market (Standing 2011; Siebert and Wilson 2013) and creating the expectation that unpaid work is a rite of passage or is necessary for success (Discenna 2016). Consistent with other studies, some participants in this study reported that they felt used in their placement and cynically perceived unpaid WIL placements as an opportunity for employers to gain access to cheap or free labour (Hall 2010; SMC 2012; Wray & McCall 2007).

It has been suggested that the on-the-job learning focus provided by WIL participation can contribute to the confidence of both graduates and employers, regarding the ability to do the job and enhance employment prospects through increased workplace exposure and the development of professional networks and social and professional skills (Gault *et al.* 2000, 2010; Knouse & Fontenot 2008). However, the purported employability benefits of unpaid work experiences often overshadow consideration of the personal aspects of the experience. This includes appropriate identification and consideration of the impact, both negative and positive, that participation can have on the participant's life outside of WIL which can last long after the workplace experience has ended.

The diversity in the student population presents a challenge for university administrators seeking to provide equitable access to high quality WIL experiences. Extant policies focused on supporting WIL participation typically provide direction for discharging institutional duty of care around a range of pragmatic, professional and academic interests. Such policies are intended to keep students safe while offering authentic learning experiences that meet professional accreditation requirements. However, there is often a more limited focus on ensuring that participants' social, psychological, and economic needs are met. Even where institutional supports exist, such as the availability of counselling services and food banks, they are often unavailable on weekends or after hours, and many students are constrained in their willingness to access such services as a result of potential social stigma. Focussing on wellbeing avoids the potential to overlook this dimension of WIL and recognises that it can have both an enhancing and a diminishing impact on an individual's accrued wellbeing.

WIL Participants Experience High Levels of Financial Stress

There is a vigorous and ongoing debate regarding the place of unpaid work in learning programs specifically around whether or not such placements should indeed be paid (Craig and Wilke 2016; Edwards and Hertel-

Fernandez 2010; Jones and Seltzer 2015; Lawton and Potter 2010; Smith *et al.* 2015;) and increasing critical reflection on the extent to which participation in unpaid work has been uncritically facilitated, adopted and encouraged. The trend towards increasing participation in unpaid WIL has also raised concerns around equity of access and the costs of participation. Access to unpaid work experience opportunities are identified in the literature as being highly classed, raced, gendered, ageist and subject to geographical inequalities (Allen *et al.* 2013; Bennett 2011; Boulton 2015; Hughes & Lagomarsine 2015; O'Connor & Bodicoat 2017; Regan Shade & Jacobson 2015). Further, those who are economically disadvantaged may not have the same opportunities to participate due to the imperative of juggling unpaid work while also undertaking paid work (often in retail, food services and the like) in order to cover living expenses. These limits to participation in unpaid work, whether through a WIL program or unsanctioned internship, may function as a structure of exclusion and reduced social mobility within the labour market by constraining career opportunities and access to certain employment pathways for those without adequate financial, social and education resources (Curiale 2010; Frenette 2013).

Participation in WIL is often accompanied with additional food, travel, clothing and placement related equipment costs alongside regular rent and grocery expenditure (Bexley *et al.* 2013; Brough *et al.* 2015; Johnstone *et al.* 2016; Moore *et al.* 2012). A participant's inability to rapidly recover from financial loss incurred from a participation in a placement before the commencement of the next placement perpetuates the cycle of students living at or below minimum standards in order to get through their degree (Moore *et al.* 2012) and adds further difficulties for those attempting to save in advance for their next when on a low income (Brough *et al.* 2015). This study found that WIL participants experience significant financial stress and insecurity relative to their normal financial position when not undertaking a placement. This is caused by the unpaid nature of WIL and the fact that it is often undertaken over an extended, yet intensive, period of time which negates the ability to undertake paid work or maintain the same number of hours of paid work. Consistent with the high levels of financial stress, many respondents reported that saving money and reducing costs by *budgeting and living frugally* during the period of the practicum placements was a key strategy employed in order to reduce the impact of financial stress. Some participants reported forgoing necessities when undertaking their WIL placement due to financial reasons. One of the key costs that respondents sought to cut was food and many respondents reported reducing their food spend by purchasing less food or food of a lesser quality.

While there was evidence of significant saving in preparation for the practicum, not all students were able to create this financial buffer and even for those who had managed to have significant savings these were often eroded by unexpected expenses. Thus, although such measures were not always successful there was evidence of respondents treating the practicum experience as a "site of financial learning" (Riach *et al.* 2016, 11) and carrying this learning forward to subsequent unpaid work experiences. However, the significant financial loss for students acquired from their participation in WIL experiences (Brough *et al.* 2015; Devlin *et al.* 2008; Johnstone *et al.* 2016) places significant burden on multiple areas of the participant's life and has implications before, after and during the placement experience. In addition to the loss of income and possibility of losing their job while undertaking their placement (Halsey 2005), students are also faced with an accumulation of debt, commercial rates of interest being charged on small short term loans, and taking on extra credit card debt to assist them in navigating the additional costs incurred from their placement (Bexley *et al.* 2013; Brough *et al.* 2015). This demonstrates that the cost of practicum goes far beyond those expenses directly associated with preparation and participation and has longer term implications.

Consistent with other similar research, we found that the financial stress and pressure associated with WIL participation can be, and often is, experienced by all kinds of students but that those with high levels of familial financial support tended to experience lower levels of change in their financial circumstances when undertaking an unpaid WIL placement (but they are not necessarily financially secure). The far reaching and ubiquitous nature of financial stress experience suggests that this issue warrants significant policy attention.

Participants Experience Multiple and Connected Stress as a Result of WIL

In addition to the financial stresses experienced, a range of other academic and personal factors have been recognised as eliciting stress in the WIL experience (Goh & Matthews 2011; Hamaidi *et al.* 2014; Kanno & Koesk 2010; Murtagh 2015; Pellett & Pellett 2005). Students often compromise their grades because they feel they have little choice but to work during the semester so they have enough financial resources to survive during their placement (Brough *et al.* 2015; Duignan, 2003; Hemy *et al.* 2016). Despite the difficulties experienced and high levels of tiredness, respondents overwhelmingly report feeling happy and enjoying themselves on the WIL placement, with positive experiences confirming their decision to pursue a career in that industry/field (Bates & Bates 2013; McCall *et al.* 2009; Patrick *et al.* 2009). Despite the physical and emotional stress experienced by students as a result of their placement participation, it is clear there are many benefits to their involvement, with some of the stresses around financial, emotional, personal, and academic challenges needing to be better supported to alleviate some of the strain and pressure experienced in these domains. A significant contributor to this stress is the role conflict that participants experience when attempting to juggle paid work, caring, unpaid WIL and other academic commitments.

WIL Workplaces Need Better Preparation and Support

Despite the suggestion in prior research that students value the competitive edge in the job seeking process—which they believe participation in an unpaid WIL placement will provide (Discenna 2016; Smith *et al.* 2015; Cannon and Arnold 1998)—the cohort in this study placed high importance on the opportunity to learn and develop as an emerging professional. As a result of the combination of workplace power dynamics and the presumed benefits of participation, unpaid workers may be very reluctant to walk away from poor quality placements (Durack 2013) or to refuse requests made by employers. Further, it is also probable that participants will be unlikely to raise concerns for fear of their professional reputation or later access to employment opportunities (Grant Bowman and Lipp 2000). It is therefore vital that employers who participate in WIL programs receive appropriate briefing and training to ensure they understand the pedagogical focus of the placement and that they are focused on placing student learning at the centre of the experience.

Higher education institutions have significant legal and administrative responsibilities in relation to the administration of WIL experiences (Cameron 2013; Cameron & Klopper 2015; Craig & Wilke 2016). Universities may be liable for injuries or other harm incurred during university sanctioned or supported learning activities, even though in reality, they often have limited control over what happens to the student at an offsite location (Cameron & Klopper 2015; Svacina 2012). Indeed, higher education institutions are increasingly expected to instigate a range of preventative and responsive risk management measures which ensure student wellbeing and protect institutional reputation and potential liability (Batra *et al.* 2014; Miller *et al.* 2002; Saunders 2000; Svacina 2012). Such measures include educating students about their 'employment' rights; informing them about risks they may encounter because they are not in a formal employment relationship; providing adequate support during periods of unpaid work; appropriately supervising and monitoring workplace experiences and responding to concerns (Gregory 1998; Poe 2010; Svacina 2012). It also involves screening potential 'employers', educating them about their responsibilities to students and under the law, and discontinuing partnerships with employers who have repeated complaints made against them. Levels of institutional oversight and support are variable, particularly around the institutional extent of involvement in screening potential employers and providing academic mentoring (Elijido-ten and Kloot 2015; Miller *et al.* 2002). Indeed, given the value placed on maintaining industry relationships (Cook *et al.* 2015), some concerns have been expressed regarding the extent to which academic or administrative staff may be willing to take on such roles in the neoliberal climate in which the needs of the employer and the ongoing relationship between the employer and the higher education

institution may be valued above other priorities including “learning, ...social equality or the collective good” (Johnson 2011, 179; Maurer & Ryan Cole 2012).

Jackson *et al.* (2017) found that while employers are generally supportive of the WIL placements, they experience a number challenges. The employers in Jackson *et al.*'s (2017) study identified that they experienced difficulties accessing who they believed to be suitable student participants and were concerned about student performance. However, employers also suggested within their own workplaces they also experienced difficulties identifying suitable projects and tasks for WIL participants and expressed concerns about their capacity to successfully mentor and supervise participants. These concerns regarding the quality of placement projects and workplace supervision and mentoring were also identified by student and staff participants in our study. It is imperative that universities take a leading role in ensuring that the WIL workplace is prepared for the student, understands the placement requirements and intent, has prepared meaningful activities, and can provide experienced and appropriate supervision. As shown in Figure 21, we advance the view that successful WIL participation is typically based on a strong tripartite relationship between the participant, the ‘employer’, and the educational institution (Batra *et al.* 2014; Elijo-Ten and Kloot 2015; Miller *et al.* 2002) which places student learning at the centre.

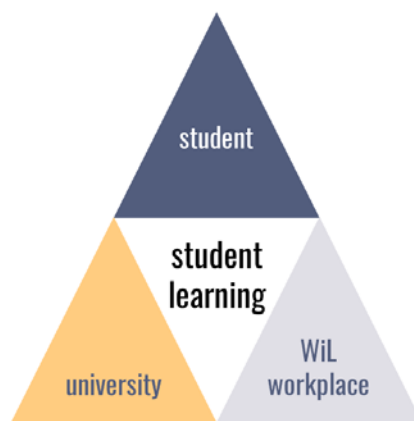


Figure 21. Student learning through WIL placement as a triadic relationship

Greater Levels of Institutional and Community Support are Required for WIL Participants

Gustems-Carnicer and Calderon (2013) noted a correlation between tertiary students' emotional and psychological wellbeing and the coping strategies they use to manage potential threats to their wellbeing. These coping strategies have applications beyond their tertiary experiences and into the workforce through the ability for the individual to manage stressors and change. However, while an individual student may be able to implement personal strategies to lessen the potential impacts on their WIL wellbeing around their placement experiences, without a support system in place across the individual's other life domains, the effectiveness of these individual strategies may be limited. Therefore, the extent to which these individual strategies are able to truly support and assist the individual or fortify their WIL wellbeing cannot reach its full potential. Students rely on and expect high levels of institutional support from their home academic institution and WIL workplace. However, their wellbeing is contingent on receiving high levels of community support from peers, family, friends, and their normal place of paid employment.

WIL participants are seeking greater levels of pastoral care, staff support and empathy from universities to support them in the WIL placements. The available institutional support and eligibility requirements needs to

be better communicated to students. There is a pressing need to identify alternatives to unpaid WIL placements which still provide the opportunity for students to be exposed to the world of work in an integrated and controlled learning environment without being exposed to a world of unpaid work and potential exploitation, both generally and individually (Fredericksen 2013). Potential alternatives to unpaid placements which would still meet their intended learning outcomes could include in-house clinical experiences, shadowing and workplace simulations (e.g. Harthill 2014; Llewellynn and Clarke 2013).



6. Conclusion and Key Findings

Acknowledging the potential impact of extra-curricular commitments such as paid employment and caring responsibilities, other personal factors on the WIL experience, and providing focused support, is important for supporting student wellbeing and increasing the potential for a successful placement. For those that have access, student reliance on families for practical assistance is a key factor in their ability to be better able to manage the competing demands placed on them during practicum (Bexley *et al.* 2013; Hemy *et al.* 2016; Nicholson *et al.* 2011). Students are acutely aware of the sacrifices made by others to support them through their WIL placement and degree, and often feel guilt and a degree of discomfort in having to rely on others (Brough *et al.* 2015; Stone & O’Shea 2013). This may result in some students not seeking support, even when they need it. Indeed, the importance of social supports and peer interactions in providing a stress relief mechanism for students has been highlighted in the literature (Antoniou *et al.* 2013; Klassen & Durksen 2014). However, the need to prioritise placement often resulted in an increased reliance on familial and other social supports while at the same time limiting opportunities for social interactions while undertaking their placement. This study found that the willingness, support, and flexibility offered by those directly and indirectly involved in all of the participant’s life domains had a significant impact on the extent that respondents believed their WIL wellbeing was either hindered or strengthened. The support of peer and family networks makes a significant, and often under recognised contribution to an individual’s WIL experience and their capacity to juggle competing demands. Examples included family members taking leave or bearing the full load of domestic responsibilities (for example, childcare, cleaning, cooking) as well as peers and family networks being understanding around social absence. This suggests that students who do not have these support networks available to them are likely to experience higher levels of stress and role conflict during the WIL experience.

As shown in Figure 22, WIL wellbeing occurs at the intersection of personal coping strategies, and institutional and community support. It is therefore imperative that all stakeholders involved in managing, administering and promoting universal WIL participation are cognisant of the potential impacts of WIL on participants’ wellbeing.



Figure 22. WIL wellbeing is achieved through a combination of institutional and community support and personal coping strategies

Key Finding 1. WIL participants experience considerable levels of financial stress

WIL participants experience multiple and connected stress as a result of undertaking a WIL placement. This stress is due to a combination of the intensive unpaid nature of WIL placements, the additional costs incurred as a result of the placement, and the financial impacts of lost wages. This research finds that the financial stress experienced as a result of WIL participation is not discriminatory and that a concerning number of WIL participants forgo necessities, including food, when undertaking WIL due to financial reasons. Many WIL participants, particularly those with paid employment and/or caring responsibilities, experience significant role conflict as a result of WIL participation. Research participants suggest that additional financial assistance and support is required by many WIL participants to support their participation.

Key Finding 2. WIL workplaces need better preparation & support to positively contribute to participant wellbeing & learning outcomes

Both WIL administrator and student participants in this research identified the impact of attitudes and behaviours within the WIL workplace on student wellbeing. They conclude that better training, support and vetting of potential WIL workplaces and supervisors is required. An improved triadic relationship between university–WIL workplace–student is required which centres around student learning and is cognisant of the needs of and challenges faced by students.

Key Finding 3. Greater levels of institutional & community support are required to support WIL participant wellbeing

In addition to more supportive supervisory relationships within the WIL workplace, WIL participants are seeking greater levels of pastoral care, staff support and empathy from universities. Both WIL administrators and student participants in this research proposed that universities and registration/accreditation bodies need to consider alternatives to unpaid WIL placements or structural changes to placement requirements which limit extended unpaid placements. Combined, peer, family, community and university support make an important contribution to a successful WIL experience, however, available institutional support and eligibility requirements need to be better communicated to students.

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