Overview

**Work Integrated Learning (WIL) at UNSW** enables students to engage in authentic, purposeful, partnered, supervised and assessed work learning experiences that integrate academic learning with its application in the workplace as part of their program of study.

WIL provides the means to ‘do in context’ rather than developing practical skills alone. It enables students to develop work readiness skills to industry standards and enhances employability. This realises the UNSW 2025 Strategy to enable students to ‘... obtain a holistic education, securing the real-world practical skills needed for a rapidly evolving workplace’.

At UNSW, WIL is defined as the integration of theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum. It is offered within an academic framework as part of coursework programs, and a work environment is provided in partnership with an organisation for the practical application of learning. This further realises the UNSW 2025 Strategy to enable students to ‘obtain a holistic education, securing the real-world practical skills needed for a rapidly evolving workplace’.

At UNSW, WIL can be:

- embedded in a course where the work learning is the central component and all other activity in the course supports the student’s WIL experience, and has an assigned unit of credit (UOC) value;
- embedded across a program, where a range of WIL activities are split across more than one course;
- a program requirement for those professions that require a minimum level of work experience to receive accreditation.

A variety of contexts can be used for WIL including: on or off campus, face-to-face, or online; office-based, clinical, or field-work; and be either paid or unpaid.

WIL must be:

- designed to integrate theory with practice and involve authentic engagement with partner organisations;
- purposefully aligned to program and course learning outcomes;
- undertaken with a partner organisation with the partner involved in the delivery of the WIL activity;
- supervised in a work learning context with active engagement of the partner organization; and
- assessed against program and course learning outcomes.
WIL activities vary and might include:

- placements (internships, clinicals) where a student performs course-related work while embedded within a partner organisation;
- projects requiring students to complete specific deliverables for a partner organisation with that organisation acting as a mentor and/or client to student, provide input to the design of the project and feedback to the student/s on their deliverables.

Below are examples of UNSW WIL activity:

- Internship (paid or unpaid) that forms the primary activity of a course with associated assessment. Internships might take place off-campus or on campus where the University is the host employer;
- Virtual placement during which students are actively engaged in authentic WIL activities;
- Field experience where authentic work activities are supervised by a subject matter expert or industry professional;
- Entrepreneurship or enterprise activities embedded and assessed within a course and supervised by an academic in collaboration with a partner organisation that has contributed to the design of the WIL activity and provides feedback to the students on their output.
- Industry project designed or commissioned by a partner organisation and outcomes delivered to the partner, but work is completed in a classroom environment on campus. Project deliverables also form part of the course assessment.
- Research internship where the research project is sourced from a partner organisation who provides mentoring and direct feedback to the student; and the research deliverable forms part of the course assessment;
- Placement sourced by a student whereby the WIL activity is embedded in a WIL course that counts for credit, and is aligned to, and assessed in relation to course or program learning outcomes. The partner organisation is integrally involved in the WIL activity design and provides appropriate supervision.

What is not WIL at UNSW

While there are many excellent co-curricular and extra-curricular activities available for students at UNSW these are not WIL activities because WIL at UNSW is offered within an academic framework as part of a for-credit course or program accreditation requirement. Co-curricular and extra-curricular activities include:

- Professional development programs, volunteer experiences, and internships that are not part of a for-credit course or program accreditation;
- AHEGS accredited programs;
- Non-authentic work experiences that are completed as part of a class activity where a partner organisation has not designed or commissioned the work, and/or is not involved in the supervision/mentoring of students or providing direct feedback;
- Creating a start-up company that is not an assessed part of a for-credit course;
- Work experiences supervised by non-partner organisations (e.g. family, friends, other students);
- Research-based internships that are part of a research-based course and not sourced from a partner organisation and/or do not include direct feedback from a partner organisation;
- Independent full or part-time work undertaken by a student while studying that does not meet the requirements of a WIL activity set out in the WIL Procedure.

WIL activities differ by duration, location and student cohort, although all WIL opportunities must satisfy the same
The **UNSW Work Integrated Learning Procedure** sets out the requirements and processes for the design and delivery of WIL offered as part of coursework programs and courses to ensure that all WIL:

- Is of high quality and mitigates risks to students, UNSW, and partner organisations; and
- Complies with relevant legislation and the requirements of professional registration and accrediting bodies.

### When to use

Work Integrated Learning is increasingly popular in Australia because it has the capacity to help students develop their employability capabilities and to establish connections between their classroom theory and the practice of work.

“Employability means that students and graduates can discern, acquire, adapt and continually enhance the skills, understandings and personal attributes that make them more likely to find and create meaningful paid and unpaid work that benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy” (Oliver, 2015, p. 59).

From Bev Oliver’s definition it is clear that employability is about more than employment and more than just about work readiness for the first job. Done well, WIL can help students achieve whatever they decide to do in their immediate and long-term futures. It is also important to the community that WIL can also be used to develop student capabilities in citizenship, as well as cultural and social literacy.

### References


### Benefits

**Benefits to Students**

The benefits to students are myriad, including:

- enhancing student learning of discipline specific knowledge and technical skills, professional skills, and integration of academic theory and practice;
- providing practical experience in a work environment;
- understanding expectations of work and employment
- providing opportunities to apply learning to the ‘real world’;
- making connections between what students have learnt in the classroom and the workplace;
- enhancing skills in critical thinking and problem solving skills, as well as interpersonal skills such as communication, teamwork, and leadership;
• clarifying career goals – confirming or casting doubt on career choices;

• providing networking possibilities and potential advantages in the job market; and

• the potential to facilitate development of cultural literacy and social responsibility, and to clarify contemporary ethical dilemmas.

Benefits of WIL for Universities

• Universities view WIL as a way to assist students to develop employability skills and set them up for successful futures of their own choosing. WIL also enhances the academic experience of students by giving them opportunities to connect the theory of the classroom with the practice of work.

• Universities may use WIL to develop an institutional brand to assist in attracting students.

• WIL courses and programs assist in developing and strengthening relationships with community and industry partners from which WIL academic and professional staff gain benefits for research and for curriculum development.

• WIL provides networking opportunities for staff through engaging with partners as well as with other WIL practitioners locally, nationally, and internationally.

Benefits of WIL for Partners:

WIL cannot happen without the support and active participation of partner organisations. Universities rely on WIL partners to provide students with access to a work environment and to work with students to develop their employability skills and to determine their own career goals. However, it is not a one-way street as partners gain many benefits from hosting students. These include:

• access to students from multiple disciplines who bring different insights and skills to problems that might not be otherwise resourced by the organisation;

• tapping into fresh ideas and enthusiasm that students bring to an organisation;

• access to new knowledge of research and practice brought by students;

• linkages with UNSW staff and potential access to emerging research and technologies;

• the opportunity to see students in action who might be a good fit for future employment;

• enhanced brand awareness among students in the program as well as the wider UNSW cohort;

• professional development opportunities for their staff, especially in mentoring and managing students;

• fulfilling a desire to ‘give back’ to the industry or profession.
Challenges

Assessment in WIL raises many additional challenges to those encountered in classroom-based education. This is due largely to the unique characteristics of WIL. Many traditional methods such as examinations and tests fail to account for these characteristics.

Why is WIL so difficult to assess?

- the learning is holistic in nature (Brodie and Irving 2007);
- the process involves three parties – student, partner supervisor, academic;
- it needs to measure the so-called 'softer skills' (Hodges et al 2004) or 'wicked competencies' (Knight and Page 2007);
- there are many aspects of 'situatedness' of learning (Woolf & Yorke 2010);
- each WIL activity brings unique characteristics that must be accounted for (Winchester-Seeto et al. 2010);
- practical issues of the degree of student contact, autonomy, and control over the actual work that they do (Mackaway et al., 2011); and
- the new aspects of learning do not fit neatly into specific behavioural learning outcomes.

It is easy to design assessment to focus on the technical competencies of practice, but this ignores the arguably more important aspects such as interpersonal skills, communication, self-management and so on (Higgs 2014).

Strategies

Assessment strategies for WIL need to consider both pedagogical and practical issues.

Pedagogical issues that influence assessment design include:

- the key aspects of learning to be assessed;
- what is considered valid and reliable evidence of learning;
- what role the partner supervisor will play (or wish to play, or be qualified to play);
- what are the individual variations of each placement/project;
- what is fair, reliable, and consistent assessment of what are very different WIL experiences; and
- what is the role of reflection in the course.

Practical issues that influence assessment design include:

- type of WIL activity (e.g. placement, project, virtual);
- length of WIL activity;
- block or intensive mode vs serial (e.g. day per week);
- location of WIL activity - local vs those more distant; domestic vs international;
- individual vs student team;
- degree of student preparation;
- ease and regularity of communication with the academic supervisor;
- amount of ongoing academic support available to student;
- early stage of degree vs late stage;
- degree of input by student or academic into design of activity;
- degree of control by student of execution of activity;
- interest, experience and time of partner supervisor.


Case studies

Video series - case studies

[Transcripts of all videos on this page]

Additional information

External resources

- **Australian Collaborative Education Network (ACEN) website**
- **World Association for Cooperative Education website**

Further readings


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