

## **It's all about 'I': Implementing 'integration' into a WIL program**

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In recent years concerns have been raised about a gap emerging between graduate attributes and what industry requires (Yap, 1997; Albrecht and Sack, 2000). This is often referred to as a lack of 'employment readiness' of students and the need to engage industry with students and the curriculum. Such a concern was highlighted in the 2007 report titled 'Graduate Employability Skills' prepared for the Business, Industry and Higher Education Collaboration Council. While work integrated learning attempts to address this issue, it is questionable how successful this is if students are not adequately prepared prior to their placement.

In an attempt to address this concern a Professional Development Program (the 'PDP') was developed. The PDP is integrated into the degree program and is designed to systematically develop students' learning, employment and generic skills and supplements their theoretical studies. It is argued that this integration of the PDP permeating the Degree enhances students' employment readiness. In addition, the PDP created other tangential benefits to the students and the university in terms of student engagement and motivation.

This paper details the procedures that have been developed, and provides preliminary evidence on the impact of the first part of the PDP. It will be argued by the authors that to attain the possible benefits of a WIL program it is critical that practices and support mechanisms are adopted to emphasise the 'I' – that is, the integration of work and learning.

**Keywords:** Work Integrated Learning, Employment, Professional Development, Graduate Outcomes.

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### INTRODUCTION

The rapid pace of change in the modern business environment, driven by the global economic environment, technological advances and market, political and environmental instability, has placed increased pressure on professional services organisations to maintain their expertise advantage to enable them to deliver their product to clients. This dynamic environment has heightened the need for 'work ready' graduates with attributes beyond baseline technical capabilities. Indeed, these are largely assumed, with recruiters seeking graduates with high level 'generic' skills such as communication and professional skills, and professional awareness. There is, however, debate about the effectiveness with which this is occurring in degree programs, leading to the suggestion of a gap between education and practice in terms

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of attributes that tertiary institutions are developing in students and what professional services firms require (Crebbin, 1997; Yap, 1997; Albrecht and Sack, 2000). This concern has been exacerbated by the general skills shortage.

The two key issues that flow from this relate to what skills are required to develop 'employment ready' graduates in a professional services context and how these can be integrated into curricula. On the former, there has been much debate about the balance and mix of generic, technical and professional skills that should be built into degree programs (Asbaugh and Johnstone, 2000; Crebert, 2002; Kavanagh and Drennen, 2008). The importance of this 'workplace application' is critical as numerous reports have recognised that a strong disciplinary knowledge does not of itself guarantee graduate employment (Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick and Cragolini, 2004, p. 148). Graduate skills demanded by employers include being confident communicators, team players, critical thinkers, problem solvers and having initiative (Harvey, Moon and Geall, 1997). In some cases professional bodies have developed accreditation programs that explicitly require universities to include generic skills development in their programs (such as the CPA and ICAA through the work of Birkett, 1993).

In relation to the integration of these non-technical attributes into degree programs, there is also much debate. Some argue that current educational strategies are biased towards technical knowledge and procedural application, with insufficient use of learning strategies that would support generic skills development such as case-studies, industry based assignments, work-integrated learning, research based learning and simulations/role plays (International Federation of Accountants, 1996; Adler and Milne, 1997; Albrecht and Sack, 2000).

A recent study by Kavanagh and Drennen (2008) examined the perceptions of employers and students in accounting of the importance of various graduate skills and attributes. They found that while employers still expect a base level of technical skills, they require 'business awareness' and an understanding of the 'real world'. They conclude that both employers and students believe that tertiary programs in accounting are failing to sufficiently develop the non-technical and professional skills of students.\*

A further dimension of this issue is the importance of professional contextualisation for students in terms of careers choice. For students to make a 'meaningful' choice in terms of career (and hence program of study) they need an understanding of the profession that they have initially chosen to enter. As Dewey (1916, p. 308) points out, "there is nothing worse than being forced by circumstances into an uncongenial calling." Dewey (1916) argued that education for vocation is to assist individuals to identify what occupation they are suited to and develop their capacity to realise their vocation. In the modern environment, a lack of this can be related to student retention issues and many students transferring programs.

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\* Other industry reports that have reiterated a similar theme include Business/Higher Education Round Table, 1991, 1992, 1993; Association of Graduate Recruiters, 1993, 1995; Sausman & Steel, 1997; Coopers & Lybrand, 1998; AC Nielsen Research Services, 2000.

One technique that could assist in improving students' ability to both transfer theory to practice and develop professional skills/understanding is work integrated learning ('WIL'). WIL\* programmes are typically described as "educational programs which combine and integrate learning and its workplace application, regardless of whether this integration occurs in industry or whether it is real or simulated" (Atchison, Pollock, Reeders and Rizzetti, 2002, p. 3).† WIL programmes are receiving increased attention in Australia with universities encouraged to implement them (Jancauskas, Atchison, Murphy and Rose, 1999; Precision Consultancy, 2007). One of the reasons for this greater attention is that "WIL has provided universities with an opportunity to offer a better product that students will appreciate as a pay-off for their investment" (Abeysekera, 2006, p 7). Research on WIL programmes has demonstrated increases in student job knowledge and skills, and importantly improved attitudes and behaviours towards work readiness (Hughes and Moore, 1999), substantial personal development by students (Day, Kelly, Parker and Parr, 1982), positive effects on students' learning, including identifying the relevance of theoretical concepts taught in class, putting theory into practice, appreciation that academic success is not the only attribute for career success, and the development of communicative abilities. This suggests that WIL activities may help address concerns regarding graduate employment readiness as discussed above.

Informed by the above discussion, a Professional Development Program (PDP), is developed to provide students with industry knowledge, professional skills and exposure to industry. This is operationalised within a new Bachelor of Commerce (Professional) program that includes the accounting and financial planning disciplines and is delivered through a PD week at the start of each trimester, analogous to a continuing orientation program that all students (commencing and continuing) participate in each trimester. Various activities facilitated by university staff (academic and non-academic), industry representatives (practitioners, recruitment/HR staff, recent graduates) and professional bodies are incorporated into the program.‡ The PD program aims to provide students with an understanding of the profession and professional practice within the fields which they are studying including the types of roles they are likely to fill as graduates (not just the profession in general but precise roles). This paper offers preliminary analysis of the first two iterations of the PD program relying on self-reported measures of student development.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section examines the research methodology adopted, followed by a discussion of the results. The final section concludes the paper and considers the limitations and the potential for future research.

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\* There are a number of terminologies used to describe WIL, including cooperative learning and service learning, however the term WIL is used in this paper for consistency.

† There are a number of possible models for a WIL programme, such as Mentored Employment, University/Industry Research; Supervised Work Experience, Customised Accredited Workplace Learning, Enterprise Development and Entrepreneurial Programs, and Simulations (Atchison et al., 2002).

‡ The strategy adopted is to utilise industry and professional body representatives to deliver this in conjunction with the university staff to maximise the credibility of the program (in the eyes of the students) and engagement of students.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The first PD week involved three days of activities in the week prior to trimester one and included a range of activities with nine industry presentations/workshops. In addition, both formal (a professional networking breakfast for which students wore professional attire and engaged with more than 50 industry representatives, and the Pod mentoring program) and informal (refers to discussion) opportunities for networking with industry representatives were included in the program.

Knowledge areas addressed included understanding the profession, roles in industry, roles of the professional bodies, what professional services is about, what it takes to be a successful professional and what graduate recruiters look for. Skill areas addressed include professional networking skills (leading into the networking functions), professional attire, oral communication skills, research skills, time management, personal planning and goal setting, spread sheeting skills and professional software. In addition, a mentoring program was established with students at all year levels formed into a mentoring 'Pod' and allocated an academic and industry members.

All commencing and continuing (transfer) students in the degree were encouraged to participate in the program and approximately 120 students participated. Of these 40% were female, 40% less than 20 years old (30 percent were school leavers), 86% had not studied at a university before and 57% did not have 'professional' work experience. These demographics, we contend, are reasonably representative of commencing cohorts for the relevant disciplines, perhaps with the exception of the male bias, however this, we suggest, is driven by the financial planning program which has been male dominated in recent years.

To assess the preliminary impact of the PDP on student participants, a survey was developed which includes standard demographic questions and a series of 20 questions relating to students perceptions of their development of various professional skills and awareness (see table 1 for these). The survey was administered at the beginning of trimester two to allow students time to reflect on PD1 and their experience in the first trimester of study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In overall terms student participants rated the PDP very highly (4.48/5) and believed that it was highly relevant to their professional needs and vocational decision making (4.63/5) (see table 1). They also believed that the program was effective in integrating study with the profession (4.70/5). These results are taken as very strong initial support for the PDP concept and suggest some initial success in developing student professional skills and awareness. For questions 1-14 in table 1 control group data\* is also provided and compared to students who completed the PDP. Overall, the results indicate that the students who participated in the PDP report improvements across all measures except written communication skills and general information literacy. Regarding the latter we point out that these were not specific targets in

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\* These students are in the same program (the Bachelor of Commerce) on another campus and did not participate in the PDP, however did have a 'standard' orientation process.

PDP1, but were incorporated in to PDP2. However this has been noted and will be addressed in future activities. Regarding the 12 other measures, the largest differences in scores are for items 3 (confidence in beginning a career) and 11 (career and vocational skills). This suggests that the PDP has assisted students in clarifying their career choice and provided some motivation for students to work towards achieving this. This is important in terms of student engagement, retention and academic performance.\* This, importantly, may also influence student self-efficacy, which has been argued to be a key determinant of students' ability to develop these employability skills. That is, students' belief about their personal capabilities (Bandura, 1977), for example self confidence, has been identified as critical in the development of students' communication skills (Reinsch and Shelby, 1996). Other significant skills differences arise for team skills (perhaps related to the Pods mentoring program), self management skills and initiative, all of which are relevant professional skills.

Overall, this is taken as preliminary evidence to suggest that an integrated WIL model that engages students, industry and the university will provide benefits for stakeholders in terms of the development of student professional skills and awareness. In addition, the second and third largest differences between the PDP students and the control group were for questions two (satisfied with my choice of degree) and three (looking forward to continuing my studies) respectively. Given the importance of student engagement and retention, this, we suggest, is also an important outcome for universities as they consider investing in WIL activities.

TABLE 1  
Student Survey Responses

Item	Question	Avg Score	Avg Score (Control)
1	I am looking forward to continuing my studies with Griffith University.	4.70	4.14
2	I am satisfied with my choice of Degree.	4.70	4.08
3	<i>Since January</i> my confidence in beginning a career in the Degree I am studying has improved.	4.43	3.76
4	<i>Since January</i> my confidence in accomplishing difficult tasks when faced with them, has improved.	4.13	3.63
5	<i>Since January</i> my interpersonal skills (assertion, listening, conflict management and helping others) has improved.	4.03	3.83
6	<i>Since January</i> my self management skills (self awareness, self organized, resourceful, responsible) have improved.	4.33	3.86
7	<i>Since January</i> my learning skills (learning from experience, learning strategies, self regulated, adaptable) have improved.	4.27	3.82
8	<i>Since January</i> my problem solving skills (research, decision making) have improved.	3.97	3.78
9	<i>Since January</i> my initiative skills (evaluating others' arguments, own experiences, linking ideas) have improved.	4.13	3.66
10	<i>Since January</i> my oral communication skills (explaining, presenting, and persuasion) have improved.	3.83	3.62

\* Indeed this may have been a key influence in the better than average performance of the cohort in terms of their marks in trimester 1.

Item	Question	Avg Score	Avg Score (Control)
11	Since January my team skills (task direction, team membership, relationship and support) have improved.	4.23	3.71
12	Since January my information literacy skills (identifying when I need info, computer skills and reading) have improved.	3.87	3.92
13	Since January my written communication skills have improved.	3.77	3.82
14	Since January my career and vocational skills (career direction, employment, application and self presentation) have improved.	4.33	3.66
15	I have stayed in contact with some of my Pod/Group members during the semester.	4.07	N/A
16	Overall the Professional Development Program was...	4.48	N/A
17	Overall, the relevance of the Professional Development Program to my vocational / professional / employment needs was....	4.63	N/A
18	Overall, the Professional Development Program gave the following impression of Griffith University....	4.60	N/A
19	How effective is the Professional Development Program with integrating your university study with your future profession?	4.70	N/A
20	The organisation of the Professional Development Program was...	4.17	N/A

This table presents summary results from student surveys of the PDP. Column three presents the average score for each measure, scored on a five point scale where 5 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree for questions 1-15. For questions 16-20 the scale was excellent (5) to very poor (1) Column four presents results of a control group of students on another campus in the same curriculum that did not benefit from the PDP.

Apart from the student self-reported evidence, it is also important to consider the views of industry participants, particularly as they are the stakeholder who holds the concerns regarding the attributes of graduates and are hence in a prime position to assess whether the PDP will mitigate these. To examine this, a short evaluation was sent to industry participants and this, in summary, also provided very positive results. Overall, the PDP was rated 4.78/5 (5 being excellent and 1 being very poor). The relevance of the PDP with students vocational and professional needs 4.9/5 and success in integrating university and the profession 4.78/5. This is argued to be strong initial evidence of the PDP concept addressing the concerns raised by the education/practice gap. Indeed, the PDP also gave industry a very positive impression of the university (4.9/5), its staff (4.63/5) and students (4.586/5) all of which is further evidence in support of WIL programs in terms of a number of university performance criteria.

## CONCLUSION

In light of the evidence of an educational/practice gap vis-à-vis the 'employment readiness' of students, a professional development program was designed to systematically expose commencing students in a commerce undergraduate degree to industry and professional body representatives in an attempt to develop their professional skills and awareness. This paper describes this program and reports on preliminary evidence of its impact on students that participated in it. The views of industry participants are also provided. Overall, we conclude that the initial stages of the PDP project have been successful in developing the professional skills and awareness of students, a view strongly endorsed by industry participants. This suggests that WIL models may be useful in responding to the educational/practice gap

and hence universities should consider further investment in such initiatives. We argue however that the initial success of this project relates to the integration of the degree program and industry, and through this approach the student participants are able to see the linkages between their academic studies and their desired professional employment outcomes.

In addition, we find that the program has had a positive impact on student and industry satisfaction with the university and has raised their impressions of the institution. This provides further justification for investment in such programmes due to the importance of student and industry engagement/retention. Finally, the evidence of students clarifying their degree/career choice is also relevant in terms of Dewey's 'vocational calling', which we suggest is likely to lead to improved student engagement, motivation and self-efficacy and, therefore, better outcomes for all stakeholders.

The findings of this study should be viewed in light of several limitations including the preliminary nature of the evidence, its case study nature in terms of its external validity, and the short-time frame of the analysis. These issues also lead to further research opportunities including examining the impact of such programmes with a larger student cohort, in different disciplines and over longer timeframes. The issue of student self-efficacy as a determinant of the acquisition of professional skills, and whether a PDP style program impacts on this, is also worthy of further investigation.

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