

It's about time: Changing profiles of WIL placements for engineering students

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Work Integrated Learning (WIL) is increasingly embedded across the university curriculum, to enhance graduates' preparation for their chosen professions (Jackson, 2015). WIL has long been included in engineering degrees and valued by the profession. The Engineers Australia accreditation guidelines stipulate that engineering degrees must expose students to engineering professional practice, recommending exposure to industry outside the educational institution (Bradley 2008, 18). Many universities use the Engineers Australia guidelines as rationale for making a minimum number of hours of WIL mandatory for graduation.

Data were collected via survey and interviews with students and staff in four Australian universities about their perceptions and experience of engineering related WIL. This mixed methods study (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2014) was funded by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) to examine access to WIL in Engineering, particularly for students in equity groups.

The evidence is clear that traditional 'vac work' is declining in favour of flexible arrangements including: part-time study-concurrent placements; secured by fee-for-service payment to agents; offshore including in countries-of-origin for non-domestic students; and increasingly unpaid/underpaid. These are all often challenging to secure, with evidence of inequitable access to quality placements. This presentation explores the current landscape of engineering WIL placements. Specific attention is paid to the demands on student time, including challenges created by unpaid placements, and the need for further evolution of WIL opportunities. In keeping with the theme of this conference, the voices of the students, and staff who work most closely with students should inform the future vision of WIL in engineering and are reflected in the research methodology and outcomes of this nationally funded project.

References:

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- Jackson, D. (2015). Employability skill development in work-integrated learning: Barriers and best practice. *Studies in Higher Education* 40(2) 350-367.