

CHAPTER 4

Work integrated learning and student satisfaction: a qualitative study in a business school

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ABSTRACT

A greater appreciation of Australia's labour and skills challenges, combined with a deeper recognition of a workplace as a unique and valuable learning environment for students, has resulted in a shift in strategic decision-making by Australian universities. Accordingly, work integrated learning (WIL) has recently received increased attention in Australian universities as they strengthen their commitment to this pedagogy. This has led to demands for higher education management to consider student employability and work readiness as well as aspects of student satisfaction. In order to evaluate student satisfaction of WIL in universities, a review was made of a Professional and Community Engagement (PACE) unit delivered by the Faculty of Business and Economics. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews of 21 students from the 2011 and 2012 academic years form the basis of this research. The use of qualitative research methods reflects the need for more in-depth analysis of the antecedents relating to student satisfaction and intention. The research questions consider whether there is a relationship between WIL and enhanced student satisfaction and what the contributing factors might be that lead to this increased satisfaction. The findings identified a positive relationship between the WIL subject and student satisfaction. The emerging themes indicate that the levels of awareness, industry engagement, employability skills, word of mouth, and academic factors are all important variables that lead to student satisfaction. Future research may investigate the strength of these associations in other programs across the curriculum, with the view to improving student satisfaction the overall university experience.

KEYWORDS student satisfaction, work integrated learning (WIL), industry engagement, higher education, employability skills

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INTRODUCTION

The consideration of student satisfaction is appropriate for universities in times of turmoil in the higher education marketplace (Thornton, 2008; Zemke, 2000). Work integrated learning (WIL) is one area that indeed may enhance student satisfaction. WIL is an all-encompassing term for a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum (Patrick et al., 2008). The basis for this study focuses on the following research questions:

RQ1: Is there a relationship between WIL and enhanced student satisfaction?

RQ2: What are the contributing factors leading to increased satisfaction?

A number of studies have raised concerns over the work-readiness of graduates in relation to their generic employability skills (ACNielsen, 2000; Precision Consultancy, 2007). The Precision Consultancy report (2007), prepared for the Business, Industry, and Higher Education Collaboration Council (BIHECC) listed clear recommendations emphasising the role of WIL in advancing employability skills in higher education (Rikard, 2010).

There is evidence that common variables of a WIL programme promote student satisfaction (Keaveney & Young, 1997). Given the importance in the current climate of higher education, further research will be the key to improving overall student satisfaction in universities for gaining a strategic advantage in the face of a competitive environment.

Past studies indicate that WIL programs can lead to increased student satisfaction. (ACER, 2008; Browne, Kaldenbery, Browne, & Brown, 1998; Gibson, 2010). Other variables that may also lead to increased student satisfaction include specific aspects of the educational experience, including academic staff, advising, classes/curriculum, outcomes, and skills developed for the future (Delaney, 2001; DeShields, Kara, & Kaynak, 2005). WIL programs target practical employability skills as universities attempt to integrate organisations into the curriculum (Woodley, Russell, & Faux, 2011). These employability skills are also considered in light of student satisfaction. In the unit (or course) described in this paper, students undertake a research project for organisations to solve a particular business issue.

METHODOLOGY

Macquarie University has initiated a Professional and Community Engagement (PACE) program, which connects students with partner organisations to give students the chance to contribute their learning, enthusiasm and fresh perspectives to the professional workplace. Given this focus, a PACE unit was selected as the case study for this research. A qualitative design comprising 21 in-depth face-to-face interviews was chosen, which was approved by the University's ethics committee. Interviews were conducted in November and December, 2012. All volunteer interviewees had been students at the university for more than two years, were third year students, and were all undertaking a marketing major as part of a commerce undergraduate program. See Table 1 for sample demographics.

Table 1. Sample Demographics

Case no	Year of study	Working status
1	2011	Student
2	2011	Working full-time
3	2011	Working full-time
4	2011	Working full-time
5	2011	Student
6	2011	Working full-time
7	2011	Working full time
8	2011	Working full-time
9	2012	Student
10	2012	Working full-time
11	2011	Working full-time

Case no	Year of study	Working status
12	2011	Working full-time
13	2012	Student
14	2012	Student
15	2012	Student
16	2011	Working full-time
17	2012	Student
18	2012	Student
19	2012	Student
20	2012	Student
21	2011	Student

Interviews lasted from twenty to thirty minutes and were voice recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were then checked for validity by simultaneously listening to the recorded tapes and checking the transcripts for any discrepancy. These interviews comprised the main source of data for this study and were conducted until it was felt that the theoretical saturation had been reached (Mason, 2002). Questions were open-ended in nature, and interviews were conducted face-to-face in order to preserve contextuality and to get at deeper meanings (Yin, 2009). Examples of the questions in the semi-structured interview guide are included in Appendix 1.

The transcripts were reviewed by two trained independent researchers who were asked to judge the extent to which the variables identified in the literature were supported by the data (Delaney, 2001; DeShields, Kara, & Kaynak, 2005; Keaveney & Young, 1997). Using NVivo, each researcher independently coded all the instances in which the specified variables had been mentioned or inferred as contributing to student satisfaction. Coding was then compared to ascertain consistency. For the 21 cases the two researchers were in agreement (observe/observe) and (not observe/not observe) for 81% of all evaluations of the transcripts.

FINDINGS AND EMERGING THEMES

The emerging themes resulting from analysis of the interviews are presented and relate to previous literature identified above. The following analysis and interpretation discusses the relationships identified between WIL and student satisfaction. The key themes from this study are: awareness of the different teaching approach, industry engagement and employability skills, word of mouth and academic factors.

AWARENESS OF DIFFERENT TEACHING APPROACHES IN WIL UNITS

Most students enrolled tended to expect that this unit of study would simply be more of the same university style of traditional theory in lectures. Typical opinions are captured in this quote of the expectations of the unit,

"I didn't expect us to be assigned such a task of actually using real data. Usually we use the textbook.other subjects don't have that aspect". (Respondent 10)

This was the sentiment expressed by 67% of students, despite this being clearly specified in the university handbook and unit guides that are publicly available. The lack of prior knowledge of the WIL elements (e.g. corporate engagement activities) within this unit meant that student expectations were that this unit would be similar to all other units previously undertaken. As the WIL aspects became apparent, student expectations were exceeded for more than half of the cohort. This misalignment of expectation about typical units and the enrichment from WIL is demonstrated by this respondent:

"This unit was very different to a typical marketing subject. It was really good". (Respondent 14)

INDUSTRY ENGAGEMENT AND EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

Whilst the experience with companies was well received, and satisfied the students' interest in a real world experience, there is still a realisation that they were working in a protected set of circumstances. This is expressed by a respondent who indicated:

"(It's) not 100% of what will happen in the workforce but it was realistic enough. Being able to speak to company representatives and understanding that meant expectations were reasonably well met". (Respondent 6)

There was a definite appreciation for the skills that were applied and learned from this WIL experience (Mackaway, Winchester-Seeto, Coulson, & Harvey, 2011; Woodley, et al., 2011). The exposure to realistic tasks and expectations that may be placed on students after they graduate was appreciated by 71% of respondents.

WORD OF MOUTH

Over 95% of students indicated that they would recommend this unit to other students. This is a great endorsement for the unit as well as a strong indicator of student satisfaction (Browne, et al., 1998; DeShields, et al., 2005). The reasons underpinning this attitude were largely due to the fact that this unit assisted them with knowledge for a career in marketing, provided realistic business issues to resolve, and helped to develop skills for their future employment. This can be summarised by this respondent:

"It's more real life and it becomes easier to understand. Analysing a real life company and looking at all the marketing strategies and culminating everything you've learnt through uni into case studies" (Respondent 12)

However, there were some dissatisfied students who felt that the unit workload was too high and the challenges of working with industry were not fair. It was considered by two students not to be a useful teaching and learning strategy.

ACADEMIC FACTORS

It was agreed by 95% of respondents that industry engagement in the unit was the best aspect of the course. Previous studies have demonstrated the value of the contribution of the lecturer, especially in guiding learning. (Delaney, 2001; DeShields, et al., 2005; Gibson, 2010; Mackaway, et al., 2011). This sentiment was reflected by two respondents asked about the best and worst aspects of the unit:

"Lecturer X and picking his brain on his experience" (Respondent 1) and "Tutors were really helpful. Gave a lot of real life examples from professional career" (Respondent 11)

Other comments indicate that the flexible delivery without lecture attendance, the reduced focus on marks, and the emphasis on getting the right business solution was a "refreshing change". Furthermore, students noted that connections were made between theory and practice (Delaney, 2001; DeShields, et al., 2005; Gibson, 2010). This sentiment is summed up as:

"Coming up with our own campaign and no restraints on our own ideas gave us a lot of freedom which I didn't see much throughout uni" (Respondent 21)

The WIL activities and associated assessment tasks in this unit, provide students with invaluable lessons that will be instrumental for their future careers (Mackaway, et al., 2011; Woodley, Russell, & Faux, 2011). When compared with other university experiences, the following quote is indicative of respondents' opinions:

"It is one of the more interesting subjects. After 3 years of marketing, you think it will be the same but this was a great breath of fresh air to take everything you've learnt and apply it rather than having to learn even more to fit something else in". (Respondent 11)

DISCUSSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

There is evidence to suggest a relationship between the WIL experience and enhanced student satisfaction (Browne, et al., 1998; DeShields, et al., 2005). The emergent themes of this study have been categorised as levels of awareness of the different teaching approach, industry engagement and employability skills, word of mouth and academic factors (Keaveney & Young, 1997). The practicality of this unit is well endorsed by 95% of the respondents. More than 50% of respondents labelled it as the “most interesting” unit students have ever undertaken. There is evidence to suggest that incorporating these WIL activities into other units may lead to improved overall student satisfaction (Brown, et al., 1998; DeShields, et al., 2005).

Future research may consider a longitudinal study to track students after graduation comparing the WIL experience with their career experiences. Quantitative research may be undertaken to identify the importance of variables that are antecedents to student satisfaction in a WIL context. In addition, further studies may investigate the strength of these associations.

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APPENDIX

EXAMPLE OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- *Did this unit help to develop skills that are important for your future? If so how?*
- *Did this unit help provide you with insight of the types of tasks you might do in your field of work and in first year of professional work?*
- *What were your expectations of this unit? Were they met? Why/why not?*
- *Would you recommend this unit to other students? (Why/why not)*
- *What were the best and worst aspects of the unit?*
- *What is your overall satisfaction of learning in this unit?*

AUTHORS

Dr Leanne Carter is a qualified educator and marketer who has 15 years' experience in industry before entering the world of academia. She has worked for organisations such as Woolworths, Australian Direct Marketing Association and Yellow Pages in both line management and senior management roles. Leanne has a PhD in Marketing, with an interest in social marketing and work integrated learning. Leanne is currently the Faculty Academic Director of PACE in the Faculty of Business and Economics.

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